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Review: Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada by Shahu Patole

By Suraj Yengde

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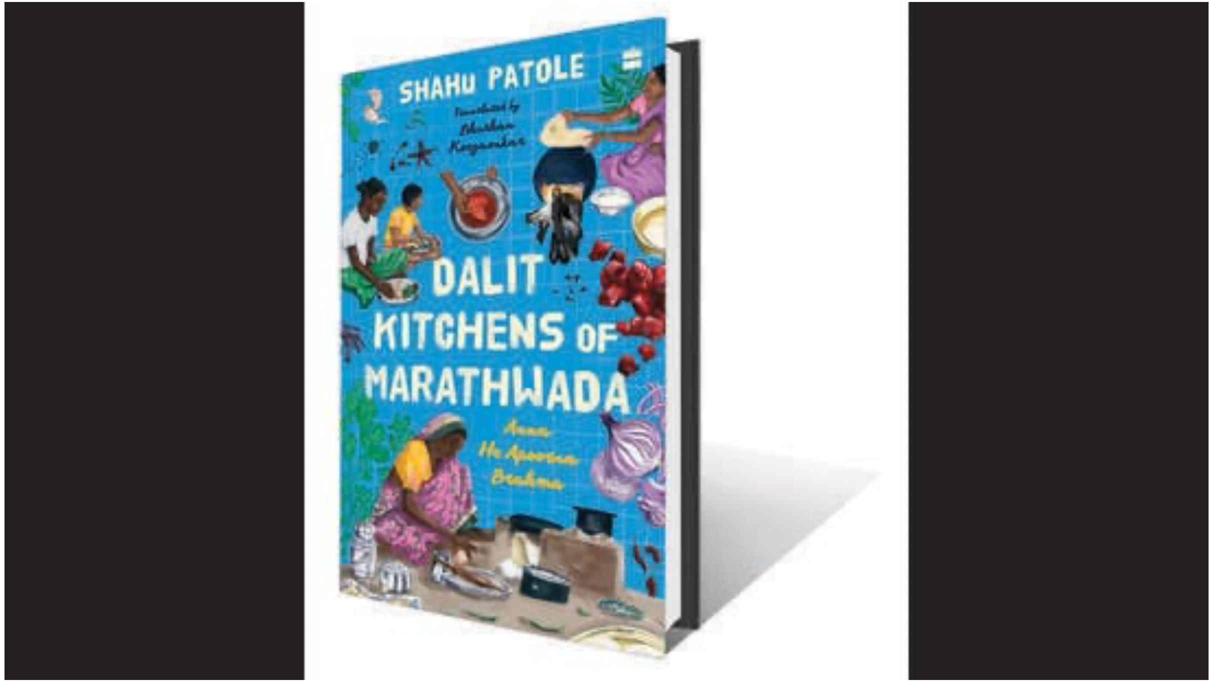
Apart from presenting unique recipes, this book also offers a critique of food and through it, an accurate analysis of Indian society

The ideal Indian plate is dal, vegetable curry, chapati or rice, curd, chutney, and a dessert. At least, that is what we are told or shown. Then, there's the classic debate of north Indian roti versus south Indian rice. However, in regions such as Marathwada, the majority of the working class of Mahars and Mangs eat dry rotis of jowar/bajra with meat, vegetables, and pulses with onion, garlic and crushed peanut. The belief there is that rice fattens you while chapati, with its glutenous fibre, caused stomach ache and bloating.

Author Shahu Patole photographed in Aurangabad on September 3, 2024. (Neelima M Tak/Hindustan Times)

Shahu Patole’s excellent and very engaging book for gourmands, *The Dalit Kitchen of Marathwada* presents the dietary history and culture of the dishes it lists. Indeed, social records and community memory is part of the gift that the author offers to readers as he communicates how this cuisine is both spicier and more experimental than others from the subcontinent. Indeed, once this food is tasted, it demands repetitions of the experience. It’s unsurprising then that I could not write this review without trying some of the recipes mentioned!



386pp, ₹599; HarperCollins

Food habits are not solely about eating; they are about creating, nourishing, balancing, and celebrating the gifts of nature. A proud man from Marathwada, Patole speaks knowledgeably about the region and his heritage, which is also my own. Originally written in Marathi as *Anna He Apoorna Brahma*, the book was widely appreciated by Maharashtrian readers. Bhushan Korgaonkar, who translated the work into English, has succeeded in presenting its ideas in accessible prose and in conveying the essence of some local dialects. He has even given names to some of the vegetables native to the region. Fresh research and new recipes infuse the translation with a wonderful cosmopolitanism making this a welcome addition to the world cookbook list.

Further ambitious projects of the cultural arts will grow out of this one. It is a must-read for those interested in the culinary history of India beyond the practices of Brahminical communities that regulate

food and dietary habits with an entrenched fascism. Simply put, this book takes on violent vegetarians who uphold their tastes as supreme and consider those who eat meat as impure. Meat and vegetables are complementary and they should go together to provide individuals with nourishment. However, India's history of Brahmanism and Jainism has meant that meat is condemned and those who partake of it are deemed lesser than those who do not.

In 2023, during an overnight train journey from Delhi to Bodh Gaya, I was seated next to a couple, who looked older than their stated age. The woman boasted about her non-meat oriented, fatty diet and was visibly disgusted when I said I ate meat. It was clear that she believed that those who consumed it – the overwhelming majority of the Indian population: Dalits, Muslims, Adivasis and Shudras – were inferior.

How can a person justify what they eat when that is what they have historically been forced to eat or have voluntarily eaten? Patole highlights how many little parts of a dead cow or buffalo were relished by Dalits. It is, after all, what was their share, and they made use of every portion. Rural working-class Dalit food is spicy, intense, heavy and carb-intensive. The author explains that this is so because their hardworking lifestyle requires them to use physical and mental strength to plough fields and execute other demanding tasks. It is true that food-oriented diseases have a peculiar geography and demography. Indians who avoid meat but consume heavy food and sugary products as a source of alternative energy have made the country the international capital of cancer, obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. Meanwhile, communicable diseases such as

tuberculosis, diarrhoea, malaria, typhoid and environment-related conditions are rampant among poorer groups.

Food is a public health issue. In India, diet is about cultural warfare, about people being condemned by the whims of the practices of powerful groups. In Western countries where physical strength is directly correlated to eating patterns, more people frequent gyms, do yoga, or run on the streets. In India, this has yet to take off. Sadly, with yoga-based millionaires parading as sadhus and babas, healthy eating is not being adopted as quickly as it should. And then there are the middle-class urbanites entering agro-industries to establish modern techno-enterprises. They present their lives as “reelable” products on social media. The dignity of labour, landless workers, and the peasant economy do not seem to feature in this world view that’s actually inspired by foreign models while being presented as organically Indian. In contrast, Patole’s book looks at everyday Dalit life into which sustainability has been historically woven. It’s not about a UN Sustainability Development Goal fashioned in the glass towers of New York or Geneva.

I am an avid chef and have been religiously posting recipes on my Instagram stories for the past few years. I also keenly present exotic dishes that I try in my sojourns. It is an education for my followers but also a shared space for food enthusiasts. Given that background, I was particularly struck by this book. An enjoyable read, it acted as a guide to my food memories. For readers, who, like me, are far from India, the thought that those at home are regularly feasting on this cuisine also inspires genuine envy. Rather quirkily, Patole does not tell us the quantity of ingredients to use in each

recipe. It is up to the reader. Instead, he mentions ingredients followed by methods. Do it liberally or conservatively; it is to the taste of the maker. But whatever you do, be mindful that in the twenty-first century, with social change, some beloved food habits have to evolve and adjust to new sedentary lifestyles. Simply put, healthy dietary practices should complement one’s working environment and psychological development.

The author has done many things in this single volume. Apart from the food critique and analysis of society through cuisine, and recipes, he points out the importance of various food items in the lives of Dalits. The book also takes to task the sanctimonious saintly traditions of Maharashtra and shows how the founders of each sect looked (often down) at food, especially that consumed by lower castes, advocated vegetarianism, and upheld the virtues of Brahmin superiority. According to Ramdas, meat eaters are reborn as Dalits. “They are stupid. They love to kill insects, ants and animals. They like to kill women and children, and for money, they don’t mind killing Brahmins and cows as well,” he is quoted as saying (p 308). The opposite of this was the vegetarian; the ideal to emulate. Despite all this, so many centuries later, Dalit life is still around and thriving.

So, the next time you decide to relish a cuisine that’s different from your own, make sure to dip into Shahu Patole’s recipes. They are straight from an authentic Dalit kitchen.

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