

Book Review of *Food Cultures of India*, edited by Sarit K. Chaudhuri, Debarshi Prasad Nath and Dhurjjati Sarma. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2024. ISBN: 978-93-6080-855-6. Hardcover, Rs 1995

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Food is not just a means of subsistence. It can be considered as an artefact that embodies within it the history, culture and identity of a class or community. Of late, Food Studies has evolved as a critical lens for analyzing culture as it offers insights into the values and dynamics of culture, opening up myriads of possibilities for academic exploration across multiple disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, history, and cultural studies. Food, due to its connection to memories, rituals and identities has become a vital tool to understand human societies. Sarit K. Chaudhuri, Debarshi Prasad Nath, and Dhurjjati Sarma's edited collection *Food Cultures of India* brings together academicians and scholars across multiple disciplines to investigate and interpret the multifaceted nature of food. The collection, through its five thematic sections, adeptly highlights food as a lens to explore identity, memory, gender, and power. This review evaluates the strengths and limitations of the book, reflecting on its contributions to Food Studies and its engagement with the complexities of Indian food culture.

The first section "Theorizing Food Cultures" provides a theoretical and historical study of food. It contains four articles. The first article, entitled, "The History and Historiography of Indian Food: The State of the Field," authored by Jayanta Sengupta, provides a detailed analysis of Indian food habits from as early as the Neolithic Age to the present modern time. The article lays down how the Indian ethical doctrines regarding food emerged during the Harappan Civilization and then how Indian food habits evolved with time, after coming in contact with Islamic and European influences. The second article, Mihir Bhattacharya's "Food and Fellowship," brings forward a grim reality: India, the republic of hunger. The writer focuses on

the dual aspects of preparing and consuming food by discussing Prajnasundari Devi and Neepamoyee Devi's cookbook *Amish o Niramish Ahaar*. Bhattacharya throws light on the complex process of production and distribution of food, which is a communal affair against the process of food consumption which is an individual act. The third article, authored by Sukalpa Bhattacharjee is titled "Theorizing Food Studies: Gender and Ideologies." The writer deliberates on food as a critical site to understand how politics, gender, class, and power dynamics operate in our society. The fourth article of the first section, "Anthropological Perspectives of Pregnancy Dietary Patterns among Indian Women" discusses the appetite and food preferences of pregnant women. The author discusses five dietary patterns in pregnant women: pica (craving for non-food items such as ash, charcoal, etc.), cravings and aversions, food avoidance, and fasting.

The second section, titled, "Food in Folklore: Beliefs, Practices, and Social Reality" again consists of four articles that deal with food practices and eating habits across different cultures. Sarit K. Choudhuri's article, "Food, Folklore and the Construction of Social Reality: Perspectives from Arunachal Pradesh" looks into the food practices of the tribal communities that inhabit Arunachal Pradesh. The author highlights how the age-old process of production and consumption of food has in time become those communities' social identity. The second article, "Sociality and Anxiety in the Foodways of Malabar," by Hashik N.K., discusses how food facilitates social interactions among communities in the context of food practices in Kerala. Food is studied here as a performative act that enables social harmony and solidarity. The third article, "Gastronomic Terrain of the Sikkim Himalaya" by Uttam Lal and Charisma K. Lepcha discusses the history behind "Sikkimese food" asserting that what today we know as Sikkimese food is "a composite mixture of the gastronomic traits of different ethnic groups residing in Sikkim," including the original inhabitants Limbus and Lepchas along with the Tibetan, Nepalese, Bhutias, Marwaris, and Biharis. The article categorizes Sikkimese food into three categories: processed food, direct from forest, and direct from farm/market, and then discusses the traditional food processing processes that are widely used in Sikkim. The article also incorporates the stereotype of the problematization notion of the concept of "non-vegetarianism" in Sikkim, especially by outsiders. The last article of the second section, Chandamita Goswami's "Garo Food Habits and Ethnicity: A Folkloric Perspective," deals with Garo cooking style; processes, recipes and ingredients. The article documents the change and transformation that has been visible over time in Garo food habits with modernization.

The third section of the book is entitled “Food in/as Fiction: Ontology, Imagination, and Identity.” The first article of this section, Bijay K. Danta’s “Edible Memories: Rasogolla and Food Fiction” addresses the age-old ‘Rasgolla-war’ between the two neighbouring states of Odisha and West Bengal. The author delves into the interesting narratives that both the states have come out with to claim the ownership of the sweet delicacy. The second article, “Food and Narration: Encoding Pain and Fracture in Bangla Partition Literature” by Sravani Biswas looks into partition literature through the lens of food memories. Biswas delves into how food leaves a physical and psychological imprint by giving an analysis of Atin Bangopadhyay’s *Nilkontho Pakhir Khonje*. The third article of this section is Suranjana Barua’s ‘Food Mnemonics and Identity Construction.’ The article highlights how food and memory are interconnected and often conversations on/about food invoke facets that are connected to a person's identity. The fourth article, Yashomana Choudhury’s “Tea as Food: Tracing the History of Tea through Folktales and Fairy Tales” analyses the historical significance of tea in Asian cultures and its representation in folk culture.

The fourth section of the book, entitled, “Food and Famine: Memories of Loss and Survival” consists of two articles: Sucheta Sen Choudhuri’s “Cultural Construction of Famine Food” and Kanchan Mukhopadhyay’s “Scarcity, Survival and Memories.” Sucheta Sen Choudhuri discusses the impact of famine on the lives of the people of Arunachal Pradesh and how the indigenous knowledge system of the local communities has helped them to cope with the famine. Mukhopadhyay’s article reflects how the Santals fought the resultant food scarcity caused by famines by delving into their traditional food practices. The author also emphasises the role of memory in preserving tradition and building a repository of knowledge that helps in confronting famines.

The last section of the book is titled “Fashioning Food: Representations through Films and New Media.” The first article of this section, Swikrita Dowerah’s “The Gustatory Metaphor: Decoding Food Images in Indian Films” discusses the gendered politics of food as represented in three Indian movies: *Adajya* (1996), *Water* (2005), and *Goynar Baksho* (2013). In the case of Indian widows, the patriarchal society has been imposing food restrictions on them to exercise control and the women protagonists of these movies are seen to revolt against that. Consuming the forbidden food is an act of resistance on their part. The second article of this section, Anasuya Sreedhar’s “Reconstructing Youth through Popular Culinary Culture” studies the

culinary cultures of two food shows. The article highlights how some of the popular cook shows with their new culture of consumerism are setting an unrealistic standard for homemakers (the target audience of the shows). The next article, Gaurav Rajkhowa's "The Nostalgic Foodie: Food Photography and the Representations of Assamese Cuisine on Social Media" shows how food vlogging has presented a new multi-ethnic food-consumption culture of Assamese cuisine in Assam.

The merit of *Food Cultures of India* is in its successful attempt to include a multi-disciplinary approach to Food Studies. The book excels in the range of topics and regional representations while maintaining a unified narrative, offering a deeper and critical analysis. It integrates a variety of disciplines together to provide an analysis of food and its multifaceted representations. The book achieves the ideal balance between academic rigour and readability as it presents highly complex scholarly analyses engagingly. The discourse of Food Studies in India is often centred on and around North India. The book contributes to the inclusivity of regional diversities. The book includes studies on food habits from regional areas like Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Kerala, and the Garo community, among others. This is a novel approach to broaden the scope of Food Studies in India. Other topical issues the book engages with are the dynamics of gender, the politics of food consumption, and the influence of media on culinary cultures. This makes Food Studies a part of changing sensibilities related to identity, power, and globalization. For example, regarding articles related to food photography and culinary shows, the relevance of media in moulding the consumer culture in India is evident. Some of the articles connect food with personal and collective identities, saying how culinary practices take a deep route in human experiences and therefore allow for looking through it as an understanding of greater societal dynamics. In short, *Food Cultures of India* enhances Food Studies in India with refreshing perspectives such as regional and thematic inclusivity and with relevance to contemporary challenges in the field. It would be an essential resource for academics, researchers, and enthusiasts who are interested in the intricate relationship between food and culture in India.

Bionote

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