

Food Anthropology in India

by Partho Pratim Seal

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Introduction

Indian history is one of the most exciting fields of interest for anthropologists and historians across the globe. Early developments of civilization across the continent, various foreign invasions and their influence on all community domains are attractive to historians and anthropologists. The book “Food Anthropology in India” by Partho Pratim Seal is interesting in many ways. The book is published by Routledge (Taylor and Francis group) in 2023, and the ISBN is 9780367354664. The author is an associate professor in Hotel Management at Manipal University, India. His previous works include similar books like Food and Beverage Management. In this book, the author tries to observe the development of the present food culture in India and its embedded roots in the history of Indian civilization. The book is presented chronologically, beginning with introducing the domain of anthropology to the history of Indian food and concluding with the future of food. The book draws attention to various topics, from food anthropology to Indian history and culture and the unique characteristics of various Indigenous communities in India. Readers feel the smooth flow of slipping from one chapter to another without confusion or hindrance while reading.

History of Indian food and its relationship with religion and taboos

India is now the most populated country on Earth, with a vast cultural diversity across various regions. The socio-cultural differences across geographical regions of East-West-North-South are visible, including their living standards, culture, arts, socio-economic performance and many more. Indian history and politics are deeply linked with the religious practices of Indian communities, including widely known and accepted practices and discrete practices less known to the world. The author made a challenging attempt to introduce various religious attachments to food culture. Food taboos are less discussed in

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India, and the author infused significant insights regarding food practices and preferences based on local communities and religious food decision-making.

The development of Indian civilization and food culture is well described in Chapter 2. The author started by saying the early food history dates back to 6000 BCE and the evidence of hulled barley and wheat used then. Harappa, aboriginal communities and Mohenjadaro are mentioned in this chapter. Evidence of barley and wheat usage, the beginning of agriculture and the domestication of animals from 10,000 BCE are also mentioned. Aryans, or the Vedic age, is well described, as is the description of food in the Vedas in Chapter 2. The author described various food practises mentioned in the Rigveda, Atharva Veda and Yajurveda, including the development of present-day Khichdi from barley, rice, fruits, intoxicating substances like Soma, and the healing properties of foods.

Ayurveda is an indigenous medical practice developed in India, and it largely influences the food practices of Indians. Treatment of illnesses and diet based on Ayurvedic practice is based on three domains: Vata, Pitta and Kapha. Ayurveda mentions the association of diet and health with five elements: space, air, fire (energy), water and Earth. The types of food, Satvic, Rajasic and Tamasic, are essential mentions in Ayurveda; the nature of food, its complexity and its effect on the body and mind are discussed here.

Food and religion are exciting topics. Across the globe, religion affects people's food decision-making. In India, most people identify themselves as followers of any religion. Hinduism is the most popular religion in India, with the lion's share of followers, followed by Islam and Christianity. Sikhism is a unique religious practice that began in Indian territory, with most Sikh followers from a particular region of India; Buddhism, Jainism and numerous other religious identities are known to Indian people. Hinduism is one of the oldest religions rooted in the Indian continent, and countless other religions have been raised in India or introduced by various foreign prophets or people in the past. The book continued to describe even the regional food practices, like the food offered in the shrines of Lord Ayyappa, Muruga, etc., in south Indian states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu. One suggestion is the dominance of Hindu traditions and history and less significance given to other religions throughout the book. In Indian culture, foreign invasions and religions like Christianity and Islam have a profound influence.

Various rituals and festivals and their influence on food practices are shared across the globe. India is a cocktail of numerous religious practices, festivals and individual celebrations rooted in religion and local culture. The rituals in temples, mosques, Christian churches or other shrines are often linked to food practices. Food is part of daily rituals in Temples, and India is known for sweet dishes served in various temples. Also, famous meat dishes served during Islamic and Christian festivals are attracting people across the globe. In Chapter 5, the author concisely describes food rituals in India.

However, each topic the author introduces is complex and profound; the book hovers through various aspects without providing in-depth ideas. This may be due to the peripheral nature of the description; some minor confusions are observed in some domains. To point out one, in the description of food taboos in Kerala, the author describes Malayalee Brahmins eating buffalo meat; this generalization is not factual because most of the Brahmins in Kerala follow a strict vegetarian diet, and they do not cook or eat non-vegetarian food in their community.

Food and environment

In Chapter 6, the author flips to broader aspects of food anthropology, food and the environment. The geography of a region is deeply linked to its diet and food practices. India is a vast land with all possible types of ecosystems, from high-altitude mountains

in Kashmir to the vast coastal areas in Kerala and Tamil Nadu in the southern region. Deserts, river banks and associated civilization forests are also found in India. This geographical diversity is a significant player in all areas of food culture in India. Indian economy and culture have been rooted in agriculture since ancient times. Around 50% of Indians are dependent on agriculture presently, says the author. Also, the need for fertilizers and the threat of long-term chemical fertilizers are discussed in the book. Repeated natural calamities like floods during the monsoon, harsh winters and water scarcity in various regions are significant factors in India's food cultivation systems and the cost of agricultural products. These climatic conditions also hugely influence regional food practices. Sustainable agriculture is a global concern, and the author briefly introduced the topic, including the need to preserve the ecology for future generations.

Political, socio-cultural aspects and globalization of food

In Chapter 7, the author narrates the political influence of food. Politics has majorly impacted food production, agriculture and its further distribution to consumers. There have been famine-like situations post-independence that were occasionally taken care of by political interventions. Various governments and political systems have contributed in various states and implemented their party beliefs and the availability or ban on certain food items. For example, India, with a dominant fraction of civilians following Hinduism, has banned the sale of cow beef in most states as a religious practice. The chapter also emphasizes that genetic advancements have produced organically grown crops with higher yields. Various bills have been passed in Parliament to meet the demands and supplies as agriculture forms a significant contributor to food security.

In Chapters 8 and 9, the author explains how globalization affects food culture, how social status is associated with food selection and its impact on food anthropology. Various past researchers and historians have explained nutrition among different socio-economic strata. In Chapter 10, the author deftly examines the upcoming food landscape, emphasizing its worldwide significance. The world faces various dietary concerns, ranging from malnutrition to excessive intake, which fuels lifestyle disorders. The chapter dives into functional and convenience foods, debating the benefits and drawbacks in light of the younger generation's increased prosperity and spending power.

Sustainable farming techniques such as organic, vertical, hydroponics, aeroponics and pink farming have been established to meet the rising need for food. By birth or later, most Indians support vegetarianism and vegetarian meat. However, the author very carefully asserts the right to food sovereignty through industrialized agriculture, green manuring and bio-fertilizers, all of which contribute to increased soil fertility, crop productivity, decreased waste and healthy agriculture. The author has discussed the many artificial intelligence tools that benefit the food business. Electronic tongues and electronic noses have been mentioned. Overall, it is ongoing progress based on technological advancements in food technology. With the introduction of modern technologies, there will undoubtedly be an overall improvement in food production and demand sustainability. Innovative robotic chefs open up diverse possibilities for customer satisfaction.

Conclusion

The book "Food Anthropology in India" is written excitingly, beginning by introducing the topic of food anthropology and concluding with the globalization of food. Various issues like the history of food in India, religion and food, food taboos, etc., can generate interest among scholars. This book is a must-read for Indian culinary scholars and other domains like

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dietetics and hotel management. The book introduces many topics shallowly without in-depth descriptions, which is a drawback. Similar books like *Food and Faith: A Pilgrim's Journey through India*, *Religious Food (What's Special To Me?)*, *Feasts and Fasts*, and *A History of Food in India* are suggestible to the readers of this book.

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