

Farm to Fingers

This book examines food practices in contemporary India by situating them in their political, economic and socio-cultural contexts. It draws on various disciplinary vantage points and methodologies, and takes into consideration not just the cultural, symbolic and communicative aspects, but also the hard reality of the materiality of food production and distribution.

Widespread in scope, it explores the use of food as an exercising power, as a marker of difference and as a potent symbol of identity. This collection looks at how food practices are intimately connected to the corporeal body and the fashioning of the self – it examines food safety, nutritional aspects and notions of hygiene and edibility as being culturally specific and yet globally influencing. The book closely studies the political and economic institutions that are responsible for the production and distribution of food, and the role of the state and global policies that influence agrarian policies at home.

It discusses meat-eating in India; fermented food from North-East India and how it does not fall within the representation of ‘Indian food’; the ideas of health and food safety that inform the making of Bengali sweets; the growing role of fast-food eateries and blog writing as middle-class identity project; the nature of colonial discourse on what is an adequate diet for famine victims; who should grow food; and the importance of the concept of food sovereignty.

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Farm to Fingers

The Culture and Politics of Food in Contemporary India

Edited by
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*In memory of Hana Malik and Dwijen Rangnekar
for the inspiring way you embraced life*

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Preface

The title of the book *Farm to Fingers* is an allusion to the Farm to Fork movement, (the movement acknowledges the act of growing food and the role of farmers in bringing food to the table) albeit, by replacing the fork with fingers, to capture the Indian sensibility of its food culture. Fingers are the preferred accoutrement for eating in India, practically in all of India. Yet, it somehow denotes a rustic and boorish table manner that divides the *hoi polloi* from the genteel. Notwithstanding this association of cutlery with haute table manners, there is a self-conscious validation of eating with fingers by certain sections of Indians by referring to an ancient wisdom. The website hinduhumanrights.info, for instance, expresses that ‘the practice of eating with the hands originated within Ayurvedic teachings. The Vedic people knew the power held in the hand.’ Often the ancient wisdom is buttressed by the use of scientific terminology such as how the digestive enzymes are stimulated by the nerve endings that connect finger tips to various parts of the body (Patel 2012).¹

The search for roots, and traditions as alternatives to mechanistic and capitalistic modes of food production and distribution have spawned a range of self-conscious practices and movements around food: farm to fork, locivore, veganism, dumpster diving, guerilla gardening to mention a few, and eating with fingers may be the next trend. There are restaurants in US that encourage people to eat with their hands, ‘several high-profile chefs are asking diners to get their hands dirty, in the belief that it heightens the sensual connection to food and softens the formality of fine dining,’ reports *New York Times* in an article – ‘Mind your Manners: Eat With Your Hands’ (DiGregorio 2012).²

While eating with hands may be valorized in certain contexts, not being touched by hand, on the other hand, signals that food has not been contaminated and that it is hygienic. Notions of hygiene which are backed by ‘science’ seem to

¹ www.hinduhumanrights.info/vedic-wisdom-behind-eating-with-your-hands/

² www.nytimes.com/2012/01/18/dining/mind-your-manners-eat-with-your-hands.html.

streamline process of productions and notions around food, despite the cultural specificities that surround ideas about hygiene involving food. And yet the term ‘handpicked’ in the larger context of mechanization of agro-production has certain valorization denoting exclusivity. A range of boutique products that paint the picture of farms from yore with politics of the present favour the tropes that put the hand at the centre stage. Apart from all the symbolism of the hand and the fingers thereof, the farm produce reaching the hands of the poor is but a hard reality. The political economic compulsions that make a fistful of grain difficult to access is a gravely compelling scenario unfolding in the food cultures of the world, and particularly in India, where hunger is rampant. Thus the volume takes on an ambitious task of capturing the multifarious aspects of foodways.

The need to have a comprehensive look at the multifaceted reality of foodways was acutely felt when I was teaching a course on ‘Food and Society’ for undergraduate students at Ambedkar University, Delhi. The course was meant to whet the students’ appetite and make them curious. It was intended to make them engage with food not just in the bodily gustatory way but analytically as a part of societal systems. The resources and reading materials were drawn from many disciplinary backgrounds and from across a range of publications. Students would repeatedly ask me if there was a book that they could consult that captured the social context of foodways in India. This volume attempts to answer that need, though by no means the volume addresses the students exclusively but is aimed for an interested scholar from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and the general reader who is interested in aspects related to food.

The seed for this anthology was sown during my adventures with food, as a chef and as a grower of food that eventually propelled me to take a harder, more scholastic look at food. I am grateful to Ambedkar University, its vibrant synergic environ that encouraged explorations, collaborations and creative curricula, where the seedling found a nurturing environment. I am thankful to my publisher, in particular Qudisya Ahmed who reposed great faith in me and urged me to take up the challenge of editing the volume even though I kept balking at the idea. I owe a great deal to my fellow travellers on the food journey; Anumitra Gosh Dastidar and Ishita Dey for the invigorating discussions and for so generously lending me their ears. Alka Dhameja, Saugato Sen and Surajit Mukhopadhyay were kind enough to give me their valuable and insightful comments and feedback on my draft introductory chapter. I am so appreciative of their friendship and ever helpful nature. Uma Medury and Archana Singh, my companions and colleagues at IGNOU, were also at the receiving end of my ramblings on all things food. I am grateful for their indulgence and encouragement. My friend Dwijen Rangnekar, who was to be

one of the contributors, unfortunately is no more. I miss him very much. And I wish he was here to share the excitement of life's twists and turns. I thank him for the many conversations, support, empathy and affection.

I would like to extend my thanks to colleagues – Tribhuwan Kapur, Debal Singh Roy, Nita Mathur, Rabindra Kumar, and R. Vashum for being helpful and supportive in my academic endeavors.

I owe great deal to my contributing authors, without whom this book would be an impossibility. Thanks you all for being patient, diligent and bringing in a scholarly depth to the current scenario of food in India.

Finally I express my profound gratitude for my family – my late parents and siblings – for their unconditional love and indulgence to my many wayward adventures; the culinary adventure being one of them.

I am ever so grateful that delving into the social context of food in India, through this anthology, has convinced me that engagement with food cannot be only contemplative but that it has to be located in the active life of praxis.