

Cookbooks – A Resource to Study Food History

Darshana Buch, M. M. P Shah

Women's College of Arts and Commerce (Autonomous), buchdarshana@gmail.com

Abstract: Study of numerous social, cultural, political forces that shape our palette is a relatively new field of academic enquiry. This new field is called as Food History or Culinary History. Food history of any region or a nation looked at the impact of historical events on what and how people eat which gave a new approach to study regional or national history. Although food is integral part of religious and social rituals in India, unfortunately it is not well documented in conventional sources of history. With the limited resources on history of food and culinary traditions, Cookbooks serve as records for research on people's food habits, as a guide to understanding the culture and society of the time. Documenting the importance of cookbooks in historical perspective gives us a glimpse of representation of the rich legacy of the culinary heritage which we'd like to retrieve and cherish This research paper explores significance of cookbooks as an important source of social history to review, document and reconstruct not only regional and nation's food culture but also various other aspects of history.

Index Terms: Cookbooks, Culinary history, Food history, Research, Social history

I. INTRODUCTION

“Touch, taste and smell are the senses least used in research and teaching, and yet the experiences they convey can be remembered for decades”

As against this statement by Barbara Wheaton, German historian Leopold Von Ranke's approach to write history was more clinical with emphasis on archival sources. In this approach with stress on archival sources, cultural and social history was totally marginalized. American Historian Frederick Jackson Turner believed that history should be approached in totality and not from a single perspective. World War I and the Great Depression compelled the society to understand their aftereffects on human lives and the analysis of the events from all perspectives. Recording the administrative policies, wars, battles, victories, and conquests was not enough. The study of sensibility, mentalities in social and cultural context was imperative and the historians were encouraged to study human history in all facets of life. New methodologies, new perspectives need to be explored. Geography, Economics,

Sociology, Political Science, Archeology, Nutrition which are considered as neighboring disciplines of history, had to be taken into account while writing history. To get a more analytical approach to study 'Total history' was the need of the hour. French historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre started the journal '*Annales d'histoire economique et sociale*' in 1929 and created the link between history and other disciplines, which altogether gave a new perspective to history writing. They were convinced to go beyond the traditional method of history writing and study history as a social science (Watts,2012). The Annales as the contributors to this journal were known as, focused on 'All history' instead of partial history and explained that this will also be the 'true history.' That is where the lives of the people, their culture could be recorded, which marked a significant shift from political narratives of the history of mankind to the study of 'small people', their food habits, agricultural patterns, production, economic, cultural and social lives (Abdullah, 2015).

This gave birth to new avenues of historical research. Food history is one of it. Food, being recognized as a "lens" through which a culture of a society can be looked at, explored and analyzed within the present also as within the past. It gave a new approach to study regional or national history. Food History deals with the origin and developments of foodstuffs, equipment's and techniques of cooking and the presentation of the palate. According to Barbara Wheaton (2000) it is also an account of what was eaten by people at a particular place and a particular time. Apart from culinary history, food history also explores social history, women's history, anthropological study of practices, taboos, nutritional values related to food. However, Food History even today remains relatively underappreciated and unexplored field of research in India. Although food is integral part of religious and social rituals in India, unfortunately it is not well documented in conventional sources of history. Due to paucity of archival sources for reconstructing the food history the researcher in this area also largely depends on the unconventional sources such as religious scriptures, medical

treatises, cookbooks, menu cards, autobiographies, letters, diaries, folklores, songs etc. As Ravindra Khare (1976) pointed out that the gastronomic approach towards the culinary literature in the form of cookbooks was missing until nineteenth century in India. This paper explores cookbooks as an important source of food history. Analyzing the variety of cookbooks in historical perspective gives us a glimpse of rich legacy of the culinary heritage which we need to retrieve and cherish. History is not being just about the chronology of facts, but rather about understanding what it was like to live in that time and cookbooks help us to understand this aspect of society (Wheaton, 2014). Cookbooks serve as records of people's food habits, ethnic traditions and a guide to understanding the culture and society of the time (Matheny, 2020).

II. COOKBOOKS – A RESOURCE TO STUDY FOOD HISTORY

The Oxford English Dictionary defines Cookbook as 'the statement of the ingredients and the procedure required for making something, (now) esp. a dish in cookery (Wheaton, 2014). Webster's dictionary defines cookbook as 'a book containing recipes and instructions for cooking.' The earliest cookery manuscripts of ancient and medieval India are not cookbook as per these definitions but mainly medical treatises. Jeffrey Pitcher (2012) in his handbook on food history quotes Stephen Menell that the culinary writings illuminated not just the foods that became the national cuisines, but the nations themselves. They facilitated the information on food products as well as cooked food with medicinal properties to be consumed for ailments. The therapeutic usage of food products was focus of these treatises than the actual cooking style. But food in Indian ethos was not only seen as remedial for maintaining good health but was also as a form of enjoyment. Along with medical treatises like *Charak samhita* and *Shushruta samhita* we also see cookery manuscripts prepared for the pleasure of royalties. Recipes that were a part of the royal kitchen were documented not only by the royal cooks but also by the kings and emperors who were connoisseur of food. 'Abhilashitarthchintamani' popularly known as *Manasollasa* written by Someshwar Bhulokamalla, the Western Chalukyan king of Kalyani covers a wide range of topics including annabhoga (enjoyment of food) which contains vegetarian and non-vegetarian recipes. The *Nimatnama* or The Sultan's Book of Delights, the Indo-Persian cookbook was prepared under the guidance of Sultan Ghiyat Shah the Sultan of Mandu. These medieval cookery manuscripts both medical treatises and royal cookbooks were intended for particular group of readers and definitely not for common people. Cookbooks whether written by royal chefs or travelers mostly discussed the culinary practices of the wealthy and the elite, but however, this was not evident in common class (Albala, 2007). Society in general did not feel the need for written cookery manuals as

training in cooking was acquired through working under mother, grandmother and other senior members of the family. On the contrary cooking from books was looked down upon until recently. Modern cookbooks which were published in India in nineteenth and twentieth century were modeled on English cookbooks. These cookbooks reflect the social changes which were occurring in the wake of colonialism. Advent of printing press, spread of education and emergence of middle class during the colonial period resulted in proliferation of cookbook. In traditional Indian society, expertise in cooking was considered as essential virtue for girls to be good and competent housewives and mothers. The hand on training was given by elderly experienced women of the family. With the introduction of women's education during the British rule the curriculum too propagated the same idea through the inclusion of home economics. Cookbook thus became an effective medium to propagate these discourses. As scholars from various disciplines have long argued, cookbooks are emotive texts that play an active role in shaping norms about belonging, gender, class, race, and sexuality (Bagelman, 2017). The recording of the oral traditions of recipes into written documents gave rise to the whole new concept of cookbook genre. Teaching staff of home economics helped to develop curricula for school and wrote cookery textbook for use in their own courses. The colonial period also witnessed publication of several cookbooks by 'mamsahebs' as a survival manual in India which guided them to manage their kitchen in foreign land, how to deal with the Indian cooks and primitive cooking techniques in filthy and unhygienic kitchen. Another class of readers for printed cookbooks was the emerging Indian elite and middle-class households during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Publication of cookbook can be traced to an overall shift in values and approach which was result of contact with western civilization. The newly western educated class was examining their society through the prism of western knowledge and was eager to change their society on western model. Indian-authored cookbooks written in South Asian languages for Indian housewives rather than mamsahebs were beginning to be published in certain regions of India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (Fine, 2018) After the British readers, the next audience for printed cookbooks were the emerging Indian elite and middle-class households during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. If the cookbooks for British ladies were about managing the servants, the ones written explicitly for Indians were guides for women on how to run the kitchen and prepare food hands on (Sengupta, 2014). Bengal played a significant role in converting the oral traditions of narrating these recipes into cookbooks and presenting as historical documents (Sengupta, 2010). Thus, it is not surprising to note that the cookbooks written during this period were by Brahmin, Pathare Prabhu, Saraswat Brahmin, Aiyangars, Bangali kayastha and Parsi communities who were

socially prominent and relatively more advanced in the field of education.

As other forms of literature do not operate in a vacuum similarly, cookbooks too are created as a social product. Cookbooks originated from the need to document what is basically an oral tradition. Cookbooks, hence, are largely the written documents of the recipes, cooking ethos, techniques, presenting and serving dishes which were passed on from one generation to another. At the simplest level cook books are collection of printed recipes, listing ingredients and explaining methods of cooking. However, cookbooks are not mere record of recipes it goes beyond it and carries many subtexts within. When read carefully as cultural artifacts, they are rewarding, surprising, and illuminating (Wheaton, 1998). They reveal various aspects of society which does not receive mention in conventional sources. As scholars from various disciplines have long been justifying, cookbooks do not just talk about cooking but are texts that play a significant role in framing the norms about gender, class, race, and sexuality (Neuhaus, 1999). Cookbooks are analyzed as vibrant sites of social, cultural, and geopolitical production. According to Kim Yerin (2010) cookbooks are important in two ways: they represent culinary heritage thereby creating meaning to the past and they are the sources of history as documents and serve as blueprints through the experiences shared from the past. They present a kind of living history, giving us insight into dietary practices and beliefs of our ancestors, regional and economic differences in diet, gender roles, and the development of a culinary literature and vocabulary. Even the front covers of the cookbooks gave an idea of the prevailing social milieu. Earlier cookbooks displayed and narrated the layout of the kitchen in traditional set up. The women at times were also shown in the stereotype attires on the cover pages. Gradually, with the advent of the English formal education and the struggle of the women right's movements, one could see the paradigm shift towards the 'modern' woman concept (Le Dantec-Lowry, 2008). The cover pages of the recipe books displayed the modern kitchen images and women cooking in the standing postures in the contemporary attire. Some cookbooks however lacked the information of the process of storage of certain agricultural products for longer periods. Sometimes recipes become live and are also seen travelling to different regions in other regional languages. Cookbooks also discussed prices which gave historians an idea about the cost of living and the inflation (Pitcher, 2012).

Every section of the cookbook from its cover page, publication date, title, author, introduction, list of content and the recipes throw light on historical movements of the society. The cover page of the cookbooks gives an idea of the prevailing social milieu. '*Rasachandrika*', Saraswat cookery Book first published in 1942 carries the same cover page (Fig. 1) showing

the Saraswat kitchen of the 1940's, in the subsequent reprints till 2014. In the absence of actual kitchens from the past, these cover page gives us fairly good idea of architecture and interior designs of the kitchens. Similarly, subsequent development in the kitchen design as well as shift in woman's role in these kitchen from being traditional to modern can also be seen from the cover page.

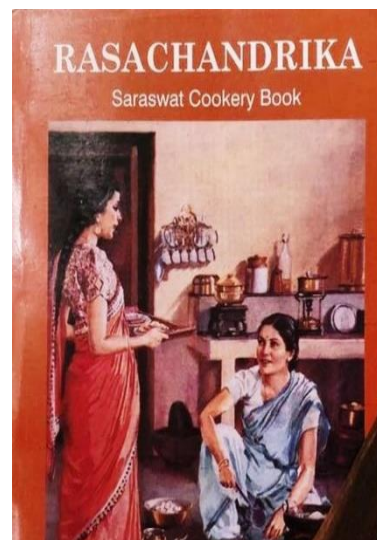


Fig. 1. Cover page of *Rasachandrika* (1991)

Earlier cookbooks displayed and narrated the layout of the kitchen in traditional set up. Women were perceived as being naturally responsible for domestic duties and beyond bringing in the wood and coal, household duties were not performed by men (Mitchell, 2001). The women at times were also shown in the traditional attires on the cover pages. Gradually, with the advent of the English formal education and the influence of Westernization, one could see the paradigm shift towards the 'modern' woman concept (Theophano, 2003) Likewise, the culinary and social development can be traced through the changes in the titles of cookbooks. Cookbooks were carefully given the titles as per the purpose, requirement, contemporary situation, prevailing taste and demand of the society. They reflect social, cultural, and even technological changes taking place. Cookbook titles displayed a lot of information on the audience targeted, period, place, culture and various other aspects even before opening the book.

Titles of the 19th century cook books such as *Supashastra*, *Pakwan Pothi*, *Pakrajeshwar* tries to establish link with the medieval cookery tradition where as in the early 20th century as cook book appeared as an instruction manuals for housewives we see the titles as *Gruhini Mitra*, *Gruhini Shikshak Sayampakshatra*. Titles like *Prushansathi Sayampakshatra*, (*Cookery for Men*) *Simple Cooking for Smart men*, *Simple Cooking for the Modern men* shows that cooking was no more considered as exclusive domain of women. The titles also shed

light on various trends such as the electrification of kitchen technology with the use of refrigerators, mixers grinder, roti makers and air fryers. The decline of the term *Gruhini* or 'housewife' in the title is very significant comment on present society where cookbooks are no more written as an instruction manual for housewives, but it is available to all thus breaking from the stereotype gender roles (Ray & Srinivas, 2012).

Though the biographical information about authors of cookbooks was very scarce before the twentieth century the internal evidence does tell us something about them. Introductions and prefaces written by author serve as rich source to understand them as well as societal approach towards culinary art, about class and gender roles. All authors express the purpose of writing cook book in their introduction. The 19th century cookbook juxtaposed between tradition and modernity. These books like in other sphere of transition discuss the need to preserve traditions at the onslaught of modernity. The author implores the housewives to follow precision while cooking as recommended in Ayurveda. In twentieth century, cookery became increasingly organized as a subject of study for schoolgirls, in tandem with the development of Home Economics subject in schools. The authors' claim that, they are writing this book to instruct girls of marriageable age who due to their busy schedule were unable to learn cooking from their mothers. Spread of women's education proved beneficial for publication of cookbooks as many authors self-recommended their books to be included in syllabus. As mentioned by Arjun Appadurai (1988) cooking is seen as a communicable variety of expert knowledge, the didactic tone of cookbooks remains constant throughout. The name of the author indicates the caste and the community to which she or he belonged thus making it easier for the readers to understand the recipes in its social context.

A cookbook lists all the essential ingredients, equipment and techniques used for cooking and occasions on which the particular food item is served as such they provide direct and instant information of the cuisine of that region. But they also note the historical movements taking place albeit not intentionally. They reflect cultural exchanges, historical processes and economic changes. How the products from the New World were assimilated in the regional cuisines can be seen from the cook books. There is no mention of tomatoes and there are only two recipes of potato in the *Supashastra* the first cookbook in Marathi published in 1875. Both these ingredients were introduced in India by the European as a part of Columbian exchange and it was resisted by Indian for many decades. By 1942 they were well accepted by the society is evident from *Rasachandrika a Saraswat Cookery Book* as it contains 31 recipes of potatoes and 8 of tomatoes. The metric system of weights and measures which replaced imperial system of

colonial period was introduced in India in 1958 so the new editions of the cookbooks printed prior to 1958 take note of this and make required conversion in subsequent editions. Reference to modern appliances becomes source for understanding material culture and increased affluence of society. The grinding stone in the earlier cookbooks were substituted by the mixers, the cooking gas replaced the stoves, and the indigenous system of cooling was replaced by the introduction of the refrigerators in the kitchen. Cookbooks did not lag in updating their recipes by using these new appliances; new recipes too were invented to keep the cookbook abreast with changing time. By addressing reader's doubts regarding them and by giving tips for their maintenance cookbook inadvertently played an important role in marketing of these appliances. Content of cookbook is as much about inclusion as it is also about exclusion. Dishes which are especially associated with mourning rituals are conspicuous by their absence. Probably this is why the earliest Parsi cookbook *Vividh Vani* does not have recipe for *Dhansak* similarly *Supashastra* does not contain recipe for *Pithale* both are culturally associated with funeral and mourning. Cookbooks are sometimes not only about recipes, but they are complete guide to house management. Thus, along with recipes one come across kitchen remedies for minor ailments, calendar of festivals and religious rituals and general tips to manage children, gardening and housekeeping.

CONCLUSION

Cookbooks deserve a more prominent place as useful primary sources for the study of cuisine of any community, region, or nation. They demonstrate the continuity as well as change not only in culinary traditions but also in society. Cookbooks can be used as a foremost tool by the students and researchers in the field of Food and Culinary history helping to understand a cuisine's evolution. They tell us about the economy, climate, social structure, taste and needs of the society, women's status, dietary practices of caste and class, ideas and approaches towards food and much more. Cookbooks also play an important role in exchange as well as dissemination of culinary culture. Translations of popular regional cookbooks in English immensely contributed to the introduction and confluence of culinary cultures and practices, both nationally and crossed the boundaries beyond India too.

Although the researcher cannot rely only on cookbooks as a glance at a society as it may not be sufficient, yet such unconventional sources talk about the history of ordinary individuals and their daily lives which usually does not get mentioned in the archival records. By analyzing and comparing cookbooks with other records we can learn about the different phases of change in the society. Comparative study of multiple editions too becomes helpful to trace changes in culinary practices. To get clear picture of transition through cookbooks

one has to study them in the longer time span. But to use cookbook as historical source it is equally essential to build an archive of cookbooks. This will be most important step towards understanding and conserving culinary culture of India.

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