

Present-day Annapurnas. Food in Hindi life writings by women

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Reading Annapurna – introduction

Annapurna (Annapūrṇā)¹ presents us with a Hindu mythological *topos* of a Goddess who provides nutrition and sustenance in the form of food (*anna*),² thereby reflecting the combined archetype of a mother and an earth or nature goddess. Since Annapurna is a form of Shakti (Śakti) or female divine power, an important aspect of her mythical persona is that she creates and supplies food independently, without the need for any support from the male divine principle or Shiva (Śiva). This proves her capacity for self-sustenance and her further generosity in nourishing all living beings. Annapurna embodies the interrelation of the so-called domesticated and fiercely independent aspects of the female divinity in Hinduism, transmuted into the convoluted and all-encompassing nature of Devi (Devī).

It seems that some popular adaptations, inspired by this aspect of the Annapurna myth, translate her supremacy into a sort of counter-narrative to a vision of subservient domesticated womanhood. What is noticeable in several North Indian folk versions, for example, is an element of sarcastic commentary on man-woman relationships and the division of household responsibilities. In one of the popular retellings, Annapurna feeds her sons and her husband, while the latter – either intoxicated or immersed in meditation, or indeed both – neglects his duty

1. In this text Sanskrit and Hindi words (common nouns, titles of literary works, etc.) are transliterated with diacritics. For the names of popular Hindu gods and goddesses transliteration is provided only once, when they appear for the first time. In case of contemporary authors I do not provide the transliterated version of their names, but the Romanized form that is used by authors themselves.

2. In Indian food taxonomy *anna* denotes a specific kind of food, or cultivated grains, e.g. rice, wheat, lentils. Compare Achaya 2014, 61-62: 'Food materials that grew without cultivation (...) like wild grains, vegetable and fruit, were broadly termed phala'. However in the Goddess's name, *anna* does not merely denote nourishment, but 'the essence of life, the support of life' (Eck 1992, 161).

to care for his family. In another retelling, popular in the Varanasi area where the Goddess is considered the reigning queen of the city, Shiva diminishes the importance of food as a form of *māyā* or material illusion, which prompts the Goddess to disappear from the world, nearly bringing it to destruction through the starvation of all living beings. Annapurna rescues the universe by offering food, only after Shiva pleads with her to do so, thereby acknowledging the need for equilibrium: the goddess supplies food in its material form and he provides the spiritual essence that leads to liberation.³

In these popular versions of Annapurna's story, the goddess's capacity to feed and nourish becomes a subversive statement; it is the act of empowerment that she appropriates for herself. However, Annapurna, as a domesticated form of a female deity, willingly channels her supremacy of self-sustainment into the energy of nourishing others.⁴ The common belief in the domesticated form of the female divinity is expressed by Devdutt Patnaik in his introduction to his book on the images of Hindu gods in Indian calendar art; the author defines the goddess as 'the universal and timeless kitchen-goddess, Annapurna, the mother who feeds. Without her, there is starvation, a universal fear: this makes Annapurna a universal goddess'.⁵

Drawing its inspiration from different popular North Indian interpretations of Annapurna's archetype, this article analyses how contemporary women authors of autobiographies in Hindi re-examine a culturally specific discourse on food. In their narratives, food is contextualised within their life stories and, simultaneously, within the various constructs of Indian society, gender, caste, and individual identity.

The authors whose autobiographies I shall refer to belong to different castes, classes, and regions of India, and their family status and age vary too. Kausalya Baisantri (1926–2009) was a Dalit (Mahār) from Maharashtra and a divorcee at the time of writing her life story. Chandrakiran Sonrexa (1924–2010) and Maitreyi Pushpa (b. 1944) are both Brahmins from different Hindi speaking areas of Uttar Pradesh and were both married, whereas Prabha Khaitan (1942–2008) was a Marwari Baniya settled in Calcutta who had a lifelong relationship with a married man. The different social, caste, cultural, and regional backgrounds of the authors provide diverse perspectives that often result in somehow contradictory observations on food related topics. Therefore an analysis of these themes in autobiographies by women presents us with the complex view of some aspects of Indian society as narrated by women.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Compare Thieme–Raje 2007, xxxix: 'food is first and foremost a material object and the power it brings to those who consume, control and distribute it is never merely symbolic'.

5. Patnaik 2009, 25.

Rereading Annapurna – food in Hindi autobiographies by women

Seeing that women in India are generally responsible for cooking and many other homemaking activities, it is presumed that the topic of food is markedly visible in women's writings. Screening the autobiographies of the women authors, one becomes aware that the extent of their writing related to food is significantly individual. For example, different nourishment-related topics – cooking utensils, food spaces, acquiring and processing food, feeding or refusing to eat, etc. – constantly appear and reappear in Sonrexa's autobiography. Baisantri too often mentions these subjects, but more within a social context of efficiency in obtaining food and of eating practices as elements of social inclusion or exclusion through the ill-practice of untouchability. Instead, Pushpa and Khaitan occasionally write on food in their life narratives.

Food and related activities in India are a clear marker of communal identity pertaining to religion, geographical location, social status, and caste, all of which construct their own sets of rules of various dietary customs. Khaitan, for instance, employs the description of her eating habits as a measure of her Indianness, as she becomes sensitive to dietary distinctions during her stay in the USA. The author migrates for a short period to the USA, where she faces severe problems because of her American roommate's dietary habits. The American woman cooks and serves non-vegetarian food or vegetarian dishes which Khaitan deems inedible since she finds them tasteless i.e. devoid of any spices. Khaitan misses both her family and her partner and the continuing lack of Indian food generates even more homesickness. Her roommate feeding her dogs seated at the dining table appals her even more than the meat being served. These experiences prompt her to express the view that food is what makes her Indian: 'I will always remain an Indian who prefers to eat rotis instead of hamburgers and if rotis are not available, I'll have bread and boiled potatoes instead. But I will always remain proudly and unchangingly Indian, no matter what' (Khaitan 2013, transl. by Pande, 116). The author defines her identity as *desī* (local/indigenous) *pahcān* (distinction) (Khaitan 2007, 123), i.e. a quality, which distinguishes her from others, but she equates her identity with her upper caste's (Brahmin) regional (Marwari) eating habits, which exclude beef from her diet.

However, for a large part of the Indian population, made up of other castes or belonging to other regions, avoiding beef does not constitute a dietary requirement. In Baisantri's depiction of her Dalit community of Nagpur (Maharashtra), eating beef is described as a common practice, not only in her community but also in some other ethnical, caste, and religious groups:

Mostly, we ate beef. People from the basti ate beef most of the time. It was cheaper. The abattoir was only a short distance from our basti (...). Muslim butchers used to sell this meat. (...) A veterinary doctor used to come and inspect cows before giving the permission to slaughter them. The servants of

the English, Anglo-Indians and Christians used to come here to buy meat. (Baisantri 1999, 13; transl. by Raje in Thieme–Raje 2007, 357)

In Dalit writings, food narratives strongly highlight the exclusionist angle of eating practices in India, revealing the oppression and humiliation experienced by Dalits. Baisantri writes about the shame she constantly experienced at school because of her poor food (coarse *rotī* with some molasses) carried in a modest aluminium lunchbox, compared to her Brahmin school colleagues who brought more sophisticated dishes (*rotīs* with ghee, *parāthās*, vegetables, pickles, and sweets) in solid brass containers. Humiliated, not merely by the content, but even by the meagre appearance of her lunchbox which clearly revealed her poor background, Baisantri always ate alone, facing the wall, so as not to be mocked or laughed at by others (Baisantri 1999, 41). The Dalit girl was constantly on her guard fearing that the inferior food would proclaim her lower caste identity, which she did not wish to disclose and parade around.

Another childhood incident described by Baisantri happened at a picnic when her teacher put aside the bottle of linseed oil, she, like all the other pupils, who carried different types of oil, had brought along for frying *pūrīs*. This gesture of rejection made her realise that her oil was of a lesser quality, not used by Brahmins and rich people, and it also taught her something new, as she had been unaware of the fact that there were also other types of cooking mediums. Her lack of expertise in oil products accentuates her social inexperience and juvenile innocence; she is unacquainted with the common truth of the world of grown-ups where even oils have their communal and class designation. Following this incident, she was also taunted by one of the schoolgirls, who called her by the nickname of 'linseed oil' whenever she spotted her at school (Baisantri 1999, 46). Albeit an innocent mockery, a child's prank poses a hideous threat of possible exclusion to one who is socially inferior, as in the case of Baisantri. She is the only Dalit girl in her school and therefore lives in constant fear that her caste identity might be revealed.

The oppressive character of this marginalization is clearly visible in another reminiscence of Baisantri's childhood. As a seven-year-old child she was severely scolded and shouted at by a tribal friend of her elder sister, when she took some water from the pitcher in the courtyard of this girl's house. She was told that now the container would have to be replaced as it had been marred by her touch. Neither as a child, nor as a seventy-year old woman who pens her life story, is she capable, or rather, willing to understand so much fuss about the supposedly polluting touch of a child or, for that matter, of anybody else (Baisantri 1999, 88).⁶

6. The story of Baisantri's childhood trauma related to the incident of polluting a water pitcher is in stark contrast with Sonrexa's reminiscences of her grandfather, who as a teenager – when orphaned by his father and forced to support his mother and siblings – came up with the

On the other hand, Baisantri gratefully remembers her only upper caste school friend who shared food with her, knowing she was a Mahār. She ate at Baisantri's house, shared the simple meals she brought to school and invited her to dine at her home, where for the first time in her life, Baisantri tasted food superior to that made at her own home. The memory is so vivid that even after half a century, she still remembers what dishes her friend's mother cooked for her and names them all: lentils, rice, *rotīs*, *pohā*, all served with rich ghee (*ibid.*, 86).

The enumeration of all of a woman's day-to-day household responsibilities at the different stages of her life provides a framework that structures Sonrexa's self-narrative. The author includes detailed descriptions of the activities throughout her life's linear progression: shifting from house to house, furnishing the new one, setting up kitchens, purchasing and preparing food, childbirth, etc. Sonrexa lists her daily routine of cooking, serving food, feeding children and guests, working at school and on the radio, coming back home to cook and feed everyone again (Sonrexa 2010, 212-13). It appears that a continuing avalanche of duties carried out by a single woman engulfs every day of her life. She not only repeatedly mentions the food that she prepares at home each day or for special occasions, but also provides readers with lists of the food items she shopped for every day, as well as their prices.

When the author recalls the first home she ever settled in after her marriage, which had the limited space of a rented room, she considers it a home only after she had acquired and equipped it with a basic set of kitchen utensils (*tavā* or flat pan; *karhāī* or a cooking pot, *cimṭā* or tongs and *angīthī* or brazier, *ibid.*, 170). The number of plates, cups, *thālīs*, and glasses listed by Sonrexa – both purchased and received from her father's house – translates into home-making and speaks volumes about her capacity to domesticate any new living space she moves into (*ibid.*, 178).

Sonrexa supplies her reader with step-by-step recipes of how to make a sweet dish or *malpuā* (*ibid.*, 67) or different sweets and snacks for Divali (*ibid.*, 184). She gives practical advice on what sort of food should be given to someone with a fever (*ibid.*, 66) or to a child learning to eat on his own (*ibid.*, 229). As she furnishes her readers with repeated, detailed descriptions of all those necessary actions associated with acquiring and preparing food, she proves that the logistics of feeding multiple members of a joint family requires a constant effort and the hard labour of a dedicated homemaker. Her narrative accentuates 'the insistence on the conscious labour involved in the reproduction of cultural

idea of selling water in the streets, which his granddaughter considered an act of *punya* or religious merit (Sonrexa 2010, 17) and proof of his genuine resourcefulness. Harsh rules of strict caste hierarchy obviously offer different sets of rules for a Brahmin and a Dalit.

practices' – to quote Ann Goldman's words⁷ – and the fact that in Indian households this laborious, time-consuming task is often understood as women's sole responsibility.

Efficiency in cooking becomes a requirement for the upbringing of girls, as it is understood that they will be expected to prepare food for their future families. This fact is repeatedly emphasised by Sonrexa's mother, who understands that upper-caste middle class parents are obliged to equip their daughter with the only pre-requisite skills worth investing in i.e. cooking and housekeeping. Her mother is determined to take Sonrexa out of school against her father's wishes and teach her the basics of how to fit into the ideal woman's role. This is how she persuades Sonrexa's father to follow her advice: 'What is the need to teach her any further! She will not work! She can read *Rāmāyan*, that's enough. (...) She can keep the record of washer man and shopkeeper! And now it is time for her to learn homework – to learn how to grind spices and make daily food' (*ibid.*, 75).⁸

The importance of cooking efficiency in establishing the power structure in a family is also a focal point of some advice that an elderly family servant gives to Pushpa before her marriage: 'When you know the way to man's stomach, you enter his heart' (Pushpa 2002, 161), the statement has equivalents in proverbs in many other languages, including English (The way to a man's heart is through his stomach). By inference, the observation of an older woman, verbalized in a proverb, attempts to present a certain female perspective on the dominant position in the household. The advice is to operate within the established system, where a man is the head of the family, but with a subversive intention and mode, i.e. the ability to nourish can be used to influence people, especially men, in order to establish a more convoluted and less obvious sub-structure of power within the family.

Group efforts, often required because of the prolonged processes of food making or the need to prepare it in bulk, create occasions for women from the family, community or even colony to connect and bond. Baisantri, who composes a somehow idealised image of her childhood and youth in her autobiography, dwells on the equal share of kitchen responsibilities in her family, a harmonious routine of everyday cooking that involved all its members and from which a special connection between her mother, sisters and her ensued. The

7. Goldman 1992, 172.

8. Interestingly, the father – to counter his wife's reservations and to let Sonrexa attend her classes – made an effort to teach his daughter cooking. During one of his lessons, Sonrexa burnt the vegetables, since she was completely immersed in reading a short story by Premchand in a magazine (*ibid.*, 95-96). The account of the childhood incident is in contrast with the other passages in the narrative, where the author describes her competence in cooking even large quantities of food. She was forced to acquire this competence when, in her early teens, after the death of her mother, she prematurely had to take her share of household duties. If not otherwise stated, the translations from Hindi are made by the author.

junctures for larger gatherings of women, such as making pickles, *pāpaṛs*, *beriyās*, food for festivals etc., create space for orally transmitted cultural practices. Baisantri, for example, writes about Dalit women singing songs in praise of Ambedkar while grinding flour (Baisantri 1999, 82).

Limbale in his *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Writings*⁹ underlines the fact that the continuing scarcity of food in Dalit communities results in Dalit writers focusing on subjects related to securing access to food. Efficient provision, procurement, preservation or complete ‘recycling’ of cooked food dominate, whereas the aspect of sensual enjoyment and pleasure of eating is missing. Baisantri derives pride from detailed descriptions of how effective and resourceful Dalits are in acquiring food from wild growing plants and trees. Moreover, she describes how her family reuses stale food, which for some caste groups is a strict food taboo, since stale food is considered ritually polluted and thus harmful:

If there was food left over from the night before the younger siblings would eat it. During summers if there was stale food left over, we would add water to it and keep, and the next morning cook it in tamarind water like khitchri. (...) We never threw any food away. If there was wedding in the neighbourhood and there was any food leftover we prepared this kind of *ghata* and distributed it among neighbours. If there was a lot of rice left over we'd put it out in the sun to dry and when it was really dry we ground it into a powder and made rotis. That is to say instead of throwing away the grain we used it. (Baisantri 1999, 50; transl. by Raje 2007, 361)

Baisantri experienced food shortages during her lifetime and is acutely aware of the social and moral responsibility that is attached to food and, even more significantly, to excessive eating and feasting in the Indian social context. On the one hand, large communities are excluded from the bare necessities of daily sustenance, while, on the other, the serving of great quantities of food to guests is a much-required part of social gatherings, religious ceremonies, festivals, etc. She mentions a visit to a donning of a *janeū* or the sacred thread ceremony of an acquaintance, where guests were served plenty of various snacks and a rich dinner, which made her depressed, because she continuously thought about the food wastage:

Plenty of different dishes were made. Sweet *laḍḍūs*, rich *pulāo*, fried *pūrīs* and *pakoṛās*, sugary *śrikhānd* and many more. When I was eating I suddenly remembered that at home my little brothers and sisters, my parents, they were probably having the everyday potatoes and aubergine in gravy with coarse rice. I was saddened. I was eating but I grieved over the wastage of all

9. Limbale 2004, 115.

that food here and those children of beggars, who outside were falling on leftover food¹⁰ plates.
(Baisantri 1999, 87)

Feeding constitutes an important component of the concept of *mamtā* or motherly affection and love as it is conceptualised in the modern Hindi language. *Mamtā* is also perceived by some as a virtue that is unique to, or specifically abundant in Indian women.¹¹ The act of nourishing itself is inscribed in the concept of women's self-sacrifice. Sonrexa mentions how her mother gave away her own portions of milk, ghee, and food to her stepchildren, in turn, eating their leftovers: an act, which the author equates with her motherly devotion (Sonrexa 2010, 43). The author describes how she herself cooked for her husband and her brother-in-law, even when she was going through the first pangs of childbirth, because she knew there was no other woman at home to feed them. Her narrative of the event does not produce an air of HEROism; she simply states the facts, legitimising her actions by her understanding of the practicalities of her family life.

On the other hand, Baisantri's narrative, through its observation of the harsh realities of the life of those struggling to survive, gives an account of her father being repeatedly undernourished by his stepmother. She would feed her own children first, which, in a home where food was lacking, meant that there was nothing left over for her stepson. Baisantri does not condemn this conduct, she merely explains the circumstances and plainly states facts that pain and disturb her. Another practice that she finds unsettling is giving opium to those babies, whose mothers have to earn a living outside their homes and who cannot feed them on time (Baisantri 1999, 33). Working women constitute the majority in Baisantri's colony, which is mostly occupied by Dalits, low castes, and Adivasis. Many of these female workers have no one to care for their children when they are at work, because most people capable of doing any kind of job – be they young or old – are busy. Baisantri explains that in these circumstances, mothers, including her own mother – a fact she admits later on in her narrative (Baisantri 1999, 56) – are compelled to give opium to their children to make them sleep while they are away. She is reluctant to admit this fact, because feeding opium to her sister might actually have been the cause of the child's death.

In the autobiographies under scrutiny, food and the act of nourishing become the stage for contestation through women's self-imposed restrictions or

10. The concept of *jūthā* food (defiled by touch) has strong symbolic connotations in Dalit writings, since leftovers were traditionally given to Dalits after religious ceremonies or even in the homes of the people they worked for. The symbolic usage of the term is reflected, for instance, in Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography, which is simply titled *Jūthan* (2007, 1st ed. 1997).

11. At a conference in India on women's writings, a female participant asked me why Western women were devoid of *mamtā*.

actions of rebellion. To illustrate this, Sonrexa mentions how her mother refused to cook and went on strike after her husband had accused her of unnecessary and excessive cooking to celebrate Divali festivities (Sonrexa 2010, 71). Like Shiva in the popular tale mentioned at the start of this paper, the father soon learnt his lesson. He realised that he could not buy ready-made food in the bazaar each time the children were hungry and finally had to ask his wife to take up cooking again, promising, at the same time, never to interfere with her domain again. Sonrexa also describes an incident from her fasting on the occasion of the *karvā cauth* festival (dedicated to marital harmony), when she rejected her dinner, the first and only food she was supposed to have that day, because her husband and brother-in-law had had a quarrel and had refused to eat (Sonrexa 2010, 200).

Present-day Annapurnas – closing remarks

Food is inscribed in the Indian concept of a woman and she herself is equated with the archetype of Annapurna, the one who is filled with food, the 'kitchen-goddess'. However, the occurrence and distribution of food-related subjects vary in the autobiographies examined here. They are distinctly visible in Sonrexa's and Baisantri's narratives, while Khaitan and Pushpa neither give it much importance, nor do they devote it much space.

The narratives of present-day Annapurnas, in particular Baisantri and Sonrexa and to a lesser degree Khaitan and Pushpa, portray the heterogeneity of women's life experiences and present us with their individual understanding of the links between food and the cultural Indian constructs of womanhood and motherhood in relation to caste, religion, and class. These narratives draw a complex and diverse picture of food and eating practices in India. The observations of the authors are often bitter, critical, and sometimes in contradiction with each other, but they are close to the realities of their individual lives.

It seems that, just as in the story of goddess Annapurna, men are largely missing from the picture as far as the laborious process of food preparation and often even its procurement are concerned. The women of these narratives are regularly the sole providers of not only food but also the emotional support, which accompanies nourishing. They are successful and efficient caretakers devoted to their children and feeding numerous relatives and guests. These life writings make their readers mindful of the fact that in India, just as anywhere else in the world, the woman occupies a far more liminal space than the two extremes of complete submission and total subversion.

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