

basic knowledge provided in the book could serve as a definitive reference to physiologists, pharmacologists, biochemists, pathologists and cardiologists interested in mechanisms of myocardial ischemic injury and treatment of related disorders.

C. C. KARTHA

Division of Cellular and Molecular Cardiology, Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences and Technology, Thiruvananthapuram 695 011, India

Indian Food: A Historical Companion.

K. T. Achaya. Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP, UK. 1994. 325pp. Price: Rs 750.

There is an old story about an international group that was assigned the task of writing an essay on the subject of elephants. The Frenchman wrote on 'Love among the elephants'; the Jew wrote on 'Elephants and the Jewish question'; the American wrote 'Bigger and Better Elephants'; and the German scientist wrote 'An Introduction to the Bibliography of the elephant': Achaya's excellent book is not about elephants but it furnishes such a rich background in an area so close to our hearts that it appeals to all, to each in a different way. There is meat aplenty for the historian, main dishes for the social scientist and desert for the food scientist. Added to his previous detailed accounts of various other aspects of our food and culinary heritage he has given us, as one reviewer has noted. 'A superb repast'.

What makes a people unique and differentiates them from their fellow humans? Surely one of the most distinctive features of a culture is its food – that essential element in life that allows a diversity conditioned by climate, geography and human creativity. This book gives us appetizing glimpses into that hoary past and furnishes us a bridge between all the inventions, innovations and influences of our yesterdays that have made possible the wonderful specialities and daily fare of India today. Achaya, a distinguished oil chemist with a special bent for tradition and history has written with verve and interesting sidelights. Instead of assigning us to the sidelines, as mere consumers, he puts us in our rightful place as innovators

and producers. This is an example of real 'people's science' and helps us to reaffirm our extraordinary capacity to create and evolve culturally and nutritionally balanced and delicious food, in harmony with the natural productivity of the earth. It puts us in touch with the wellsprings of our humanness.

We are now faced with a virtual assault on our traditional foods from TNC's and their universalized burgers, pizzas and fried chicken. Aside from the health issues involved, which arise from the over-consumption of too much salt and animal fat, we are forced to consider the political and economic issues of whether our limited natural resources and food grains should go to feed increasing numbers of battery raised fryers (chickens) or cattle for hamburgers rather than feed people. It takes 7–9 kg of feed to produce one kg of animal food. We are forced to consider whether we need 'ajinomoto' in our packaged foods or other chemicals, flavours and colours to ensure optical attraction and increase the shelf-life of packaged foods. We are forced to ask our government why we need Nestle Company to make our traditional pickles and savouries, why, indeed, we need any TNC in the food business in India! We are forced to ask even more importantly how it can allow others to patent our neem, our parboiled rice, extracts of our turmeric and any other foodstuff which will be mainly to their benefit, and little to ours.

We are also faced with the grim reality of more mouths to feed, less water to irrigate our fields, so-called structural adjustments to allow the market to dictate what should be grown and who can afford to eat it.

Written history ignores much of woman's part in humankind's progress. It undervalues her abilities and contributions as producer, inventor and processor. The arts of food processing and preservation as well as cooking have been mostly women's work. In many areas of the world, even basic cultivation, harvesting and storing of foods are still, today, in the hands of women. The essential quality of these inputs is obvious. It is too bad that few historians, including the one under discussion, have acknowledged this, but, hopefully, in an account like the present one, the real actors and actresses on the scene speak for themselves. In an urban setting, we tend to forget that milk comes out of a cow and tomatoes have to be planted,

harvested and cooked before they become sauce. This book helps us put things afresh into proper perspective and appreciate the intricate hands on 'research' that has shaped our rich culinary heritage.

Achaya has taken us through both archaeological as well as written records, detailing the food of ordinary people and royalty, the influence of religious beliefs on menus and prohibitions, the vedic prescriptions for food as preventive medicine, description of royal feasts, accounts of what surely must be the original 'restaurant', the invention of ice creams and kulfi and descriptions of traditional utensils, and various apparatus used on both household as well as community scale in the preparation of food.

National cuisines and regional specialities are briefly described. We are sure the author himself would be the first to declare he has barely skimmed the surface of all there is to discover about the intricacies of such a vast subject but he has been able to mention some of the highlights of the various areas that will stimulate further research.

Chapters 14 and 15 catalogue the staple foods as well as some specified fruits, spices and vegetables with details of their origins and their adaptation into Indian cuisines. The last chapter lists imports from the Americas and other areas which are now firmly established as normal components of our menus. One of the most interesting facets of the story is the fact that the chilli pepper, an essential component of much Indian cooking, is imported from Central and South America. When and by whom is unknown but its Indian history is very ancient.

There are fascinating tidbits scattered throughout the book in separate boxes so as not to interfere with the text and to highlight related knowledge. There are abundant references, four very useful indexes, and many drawings, illustrations and coloured photos to round out the careful research and comfortable scholarship that is evident throughout. The original price of the hardbound book predicates a rather limited audience. A paperback edition would assure the much wider readership the book deserves.

H. A. B. PARIPIA
CAROLYN W. PARIPIA

*'Suryakanti',
333 Hinkal,
Mysore 570 017, India*