Dishes served on India's top table

THE PRIME MINISTER'S TABLE: DELICACIES AND DIPLOMACIES FROM THE ERA OF NEHRU TO MODI
By Purabi Shridhar and Sanghita Singh,
Amaryllis, ₹1,499



Indira Gandhi at an official dinner © PIB

A prime minister's day is minutely scheduled and carefully managed, each moment calibrated or cloaked in officialdom, with the person often shrouded beneath the persona. Food, its choices and its partaking provide a medium to obtain fascinating insights into the personal lives, moods and tastes of prime ministers. This route is assiduously explored by Purabi Shridhar and Sanghita Singh in their detailed and richly-anecdotal book on the diets and the dishes that have graced official banquets and daily dinner tables of India's heads of government. Tracing the entire arc from Jawaharlal Nehru to Narendra Modi, they highlight the different cultural backgrounds, personalities, familial bonds, friendships, and quirks in taste of India's prime ministers with dollops of humour and warmth, collating information from interviews and accounts from immediate family and those that served them closely.

Commencing with those the authors call the "First Political Family of India", the initial chapters are devoted to Nehru for whom porridge at breakfast was the mantra to a successful day. Indira Gandhi supervised official banquets personally, playing the perfect host. She also had a doting concern for her sons' diets. Rajiv Gandhi possessed connoisseur-like knowledge of the global cuisine as a "foodie" with an affirmed sweet tooth. Lal Bahadur Shastri was a strict vegetarian but relished street-side *chaats* with his family. The frugal and ascetic tastes of Morarji Desai and Chandrashekhar are laid bare; the former was partial to *shrikhand* and the latter relished curried potatoes. Both P.V. Narasimha Rao and H.D. Deve Gowda preferred traditional South Indian fare and insisted on maintaining simple diets. Atal Bihari Vajpayee's impromptu roadside stops for delectable snacks was legendary as was his love for dishes from varied cuisines, be they golden-fried prawns in upscale restaurants or *pedas* and *bedami puri* at the annual Gwalior Mela. A range of exotic dishes often greeted guests in I.K. Gujral's household, although daily meals were firmly grounded in Punjabi cuisine. Savouries and homemade bakes were hallmarks of Manmohan Singh's home: he loved *kheer*. The preference for simple Gujarati fare during snacks and meals, stemming from his childhood staples of *sabudana khichdi* and *sadi khichdi* together with Gujarati-style *kadhi*, marks the culinary preferences of Narendra Modi who experiments little with his diet, and whom the authors term as the "Resilient One".

The book provides a veritable kaleidoscope to view the lives and the times of India's prime ministers through a gastronomic lens. It also unveils the many lesser-known people who have served them and the nation in turn through their dedicated service. Temptingly, the authors have put together signature recipes and culinary delights from the family kitchens of India's prime ministers, highlighting the diverse ethnicities and traditions that these eminent personalities ushered into their august office. The details of the ingredients and the intricacies of preparing mutton *roganjosh*, trout curry, *paneer kalia* from the North, *appalu* and *obbattu* from the South, or *khandvi* from the West, have been provided.

The book also denotes the subtle change in India's power centre, with the munificence and the extravagance of Maharajas now devolving towards the ideals and the interests of democratically-elected leaders. The authors also highlight how each prime minister, irrespective of his or her era or background, has embodied simplicity and courtesy, with steadfast concern for the staff.

Condensed socio-political narratives of each prime minister's tenure highlighting major events have been included along with numerous photographs from official ceremonies and personal spaces. The iron curtain that obscures those holding the highest office from the public eye is parted, just a bit, in an engaging manner.

Priyank Patel