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Book Reviews: Technical Books Section

...AN EXCELLENT BOOK ...the author has presented a true, unbiased and a highly informative picture of the way as basic a commodity as food has been made to cause such a big problem for everyone and has been at the center of so many disputes. We do agree with her that science should not be allowed to totally supersede custom in deciding what a man should eat...

Food Safety and the WTO - The Interplay of Culture, Science and Technology, 1st Edition, by Marsha A. Echols. Hard Bound, 9.8" x 6.6" x 0.6".
Kluwer Law International, P.O. Box 85889, 2508 CN The Hague, The Netherlands. Publication Date November 2001, 192 pp., ISBN-10: 9041198490; ISBN-13: 978-9041198495. Price EUR 80.00 / USD 74.00 / GBP 50.00

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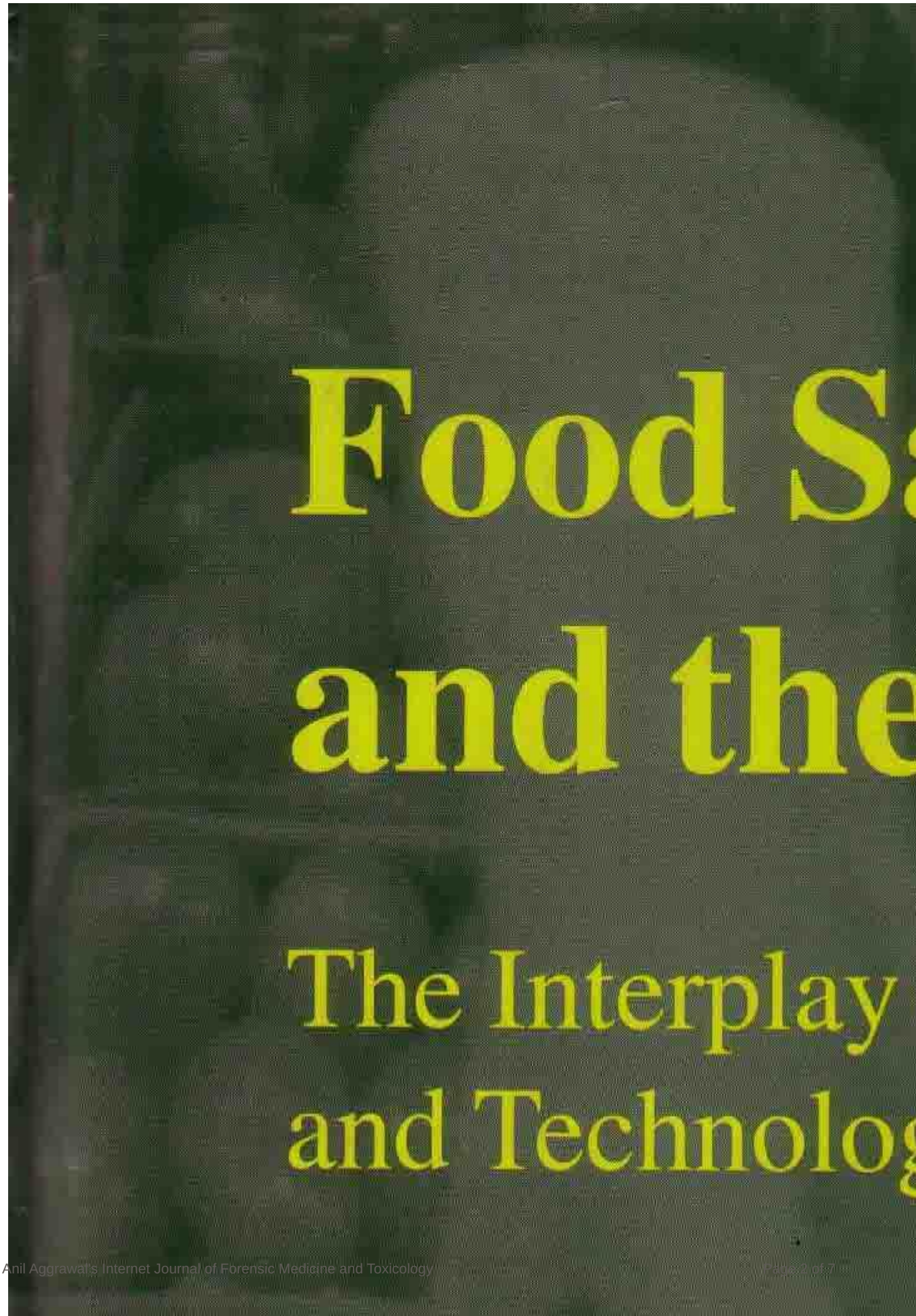
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GATT, WTO, Uruguay Round etc. are the words which have hogged the limelight during the past decade. These are the words that have been in the news in both print and electronic media. Every time one talks about economy, these are the words that are talked about. As a layman all we understood about these words, before reading this book, was that they were some sort of negotiations going between the developed and developing countries regarding trade and commerce. And all that we came to know was that the developed countries were bullying around the developing countries into submitting to some sort of very unjust trade order that would totally destroy these less developed economies. We would not comment upon the truth of these rumors and let the experts deal with that. Here I would do the job entrusted to me i.e. to review this book.

Before we start saying anything about this book we must say that we are no expert on the matters of trade, economy, business etc. So we would restrict ourselves to just saying how good, bad, informative etc. the book is and not dwell about the authenticity or correctness of the matter published in the book.

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The author starts off by describing " food as culture...". She has stated various examples from all over the world to illustrate that food is not just something to eat. It is " culture in northeast Brazil, France and Japan....religion in India and Saudi Arabia....medicine in China etc." She seems to have done a lot of research to find out the various traditions associated with food all over the world. She has described the various uses of food like food as culture, religion, medicine, taboo, security etc. She has also described, on page 16, the nine "fundamental, universal functions" of food. All this implies that the author has done her homework properly. It also tells that what one is going to read further in the book will also be well researched.

...the author has described the evolution of food through various stages in historical perspective. She says that "there are four prototypes of the relationship between food production, culture and regulation" and then goes on to describe these four prototypes as they have evolved over time. In this she has also described various cases like the beer case of 1987 that were based on laws framed long time back. Here she has also described the various stages through which the production and distribution i.e. the commerce of food has evolved to its present state. This gives the reader a historical perspective of the reason of the present tradeoff between various countries over the commerce of food...

In the next chapter the author has described the evolution of food through various stages in historical perspective. She says that "there are four prototypes of the relationship between food production, culture and regulation" and then goes on to describe these four prototypes as they have evolved over time. In this she has also described various cases like the beer case of 1987 that were based on laws framed long time back. Here she has also described the various stages through which the production and distribution i.e. the commerce of food has evolved to its present state. This gives the reader a historical perspective of the reason of the present tradeoff between various countries over the commerce of food.

The next few chapters, chapter 4-6, to be precise, deal with the commerce of food, the hazards of new developments and their risks. Here she has described what GATT stands for, its requirements, uses, objectives etc. She has given the example of the beef hormone dispute for explanation. She has described how this dispute arose and the various arguments put forth by the warring parties. It gives us an idea of how these trade disputes arise and how they are discussed and resolved. Next

she discusses about the hazards of modern technologies used in farming with special reference to genetic engineering. The best part in this chapter is the description of various definitions of food hazards like additives, contaminants, toxins etc. as mentioned in various trade agreements like GATT, Codex etc. She has described genetic technology in detail and the various arguments that go both for and against their use. This is of prime importance as this is going to be the most important topic of debate in the coming decades. The author has also described the difference between hazard and risk as perceived and written in the various agreements. She also tells about the ways of assessing these risks and how they can be ameliorated by proper education. She has again given proper examples that of salmon and Varietals to explain these points.

…the author starts off by giving the definition of sanitary measures and then goes on to describe how they can be implemented. Here she has also described some of the articles of the various agreements in some detail like article 3:3, article 5:7 etc. The description of these articles gives an idea about the way these trade organizations work…

The next part of the book deals with the various sanitary measures, how they are implemented, the obligations and duties of the member countries etc. She starts off by giving the definition of sanitary measures and then goes on to describe how they can be implemented. Here she has also described some of the articles of the various agreements in some detail like article 3:3, article 5:7 etc. The description of these articles gives an idea about the way these trade organizations work. The obligations mentioned are the duties that are expected of both the developed and the developing countries. The authors has given an unbiased view as to how often the nations don't do their duties but expect others to do theirs. This leads to confrontation between them.

Now let us come to the difficult part of book reviewing i.e. the shortcomings in the book. The first flaw that we noticed was in the language of the book. Although the author has tried to present the book as an investigation into the interplay of culture, science and technology, many times it appears that she is merely stating the facts as they are. Her own views are few and far between and are especially restricted to conclusion at the end of each chapter. Another flaw was that she has mentioned about a lot of articles but described only a few of those. This makes it difficult for a novice like us to understand what she is talking about and what is the relevance of these numbers, as they appear page after page.

…In the end we would say that the author has presented a true, unbiased and a highly informative picture of the way as basic a commodity as food has been made to cause such a big problem for everyone and has been at the center of so many disputes. We do agree with her that science should not be allowed to totally supersede custom in deciding what a man should eat…

Another problem that we encountered was the not so detailed description of the various trade agreements. Since the book deals with these trade agreements it was imperative for the author to describe these agreements like GATT, SPS, Codex in a little more detail. This could have given a better idea about the kind of discussions that go on at these forums. Maybe a better method could have been to describe these agreements in detail and then present her views on each topic separately.

In the end we would say that the author has presented a true, unbiased and a highly informative picture of the way as basic a commodity as food has been made to cause such a big problem for everyone and has been at the center of so many disputes. We do agree with her that science should not be allowed to totally supersede custom in deciding what a man should eat.

Review by -*Puneet Setia and Avneesh Gupta*





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