

Chapter 3

Dalit Kitchen: Subaltern Food Perspectives

The 1972 Manifesto of the Dalit Panthers considers ‘all Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, neo- Buddhists, labourers, landless and destitute peasants, women and all those who have been exploited politically and economically and in the name of religion as Dalits’ (qtd in *Dalit Visions* 72). The term dalit includes all those who have been crushed and broken by those above them.

Economic deprivation forms a concern for many of the disadvantaged for whom the struggle for life is a struggle to exist. Dalit and *adivasi* narratives show that hunger and struggle to get food on their plates is the only prerogative for many dalits in our country who live a hand- to- mouth existence.

Ethnographical analysis of the food culture of the *Paniyars* was undertaken to substantiate the objectives of the thesis. For the present study that dwells on acquiring knowledge on the concept of dalit food, *Paniyars* (recorded as the largest Scheduled Tribe in Kerala) were selected taking into account their large population, social background and problems of existence. Therefore, to gain a preliminary insight into the food culture of dalits, *Paniyars* were chosen as a representative sample.

The study included field visits to three dalit hamlets in Wayanad district of North Kerala. The visit covered around twenty families and was carried over a period of two weeks in the month of March, 2016. The families were chosen on the basis of random sampling to examine food experiences of the dalits. The three places where the field study was undertaken to observe the

food culture of *Paniyar* community are *Kalpetta*, *Mudangunnu* and *Kuruvadwip*. Though the researcher's initial intention was to carry out the study through the use of 'structured questionnaires', the interaction and dialogues led to modify the research strategies according to the needs and requirements of different dalit settings. Since the paper aims at a preliminary understanding of dalit culture through the grammar of food, the research enquiry revolved around dalit kitchens, sharing their meals and food conversations.

Two research strategies were adopted to address the objectives of the research. The primary methodology involved use of surveys in the form of semi-structured interviews. Since the work involved an enquiry of their food, a very private sphere that defines one's socio-economic, cultural and religious background, the researcher encountered hesitation on the part of the members to disclose their culinary space. The embarrassment found among the members stem from a history of deep rooted shame around their food. On further interaction and sharing of meals, a rapport was established, after which they shared their food experiences and thoughts. The culinary observations are noted down in a descriptive format. The striking gastronomical features which the researcher observed during the field visit, juxtaposed with the theories on food, social stratification and dalit history are presented in the adjoining section of this chapter. Photo clippings of *Paniyars*, dalit settlement, dalit kitchen and some food items are included.

As part of secondary methodology which forms the content of Chapter 2, an interdisciplinary approach was adopted to substantiate the common concerns that dalits faced on the ground of food. Theories were borrowed from anthropological, sociological and historical disciplines. These theoretical concepts were analysed parallel to the food excerpts from selected dalit narratives and poems. The narratives include Bama's *Karukku*, Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*, Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*, Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, excerpts from

Kannada writers Du Sarasvati and L. Hanumanthaiah and selected narratives from Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread*.

Kerala has witnessed brutal battles on the issue of caste. The caste system in Kerala had a different colour and tone as compared to the rest of India. Swami Vivekananda who visited Kerala in 1890s called the place 'a lunatic asylum' when he witnessed the unique mechanism through which caste system operated in Kerala. He was appalled by the laws of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability that were observed in Kerala. While the four fold *varna* system defined caste system in the rest of India, in the context of Kerala, *Namboodiri* Brahmins occupied the upper strata of the caste hierarchy. The matrilineal system followed by the Nair castes ensured that rights over property stay within the female arena. But the situation of women of the lower castes was deplorable. Lower caste women were not allowed to cover their upper body for a long time in the history of Kerala. Such differentiation in the dress code was considered necessary to maintain caste differences and prevent spread of pollution. *Channar Lahala* which extended from 1813-1859 refers to the fight by the *Nadar* caste women to regain their rights to cover their bodies. The protest occupies an important phase in the caste ridden history of Kerala. Caste-based discrimination was based on stringent laws that curtailed the basic human rights of a dalit forcing them to live a subhuman existence. Apart from the numerous castes and sub castes, Kerala is also home to tribal communities that inhabit the hilly and forested area of the State.

Wayanad, the Northern district of Kerala is home to a rich biodiversity and dense forest belt. The carvings on the famous *Edakkal* caves of Wayanad show that the historical significance of the place dates back to the Neolithic age. The most forested district in Kerala, Wayanad, known as the land of paddy fields, as the name (*vayanad- vayal* means paddy) suggests, is the dwelling ground for many tribal communities. According to the 2011 government survey, Wayanad district

records tribal population to be 18.5 % of the total population. Prominent among the tribes are *Paniyars*, *Kattunaykkars*, *Kurichyas*, *Adiyan*, *Mullukurumas* and *Tenkurumas*.

Social Profile of the *Paniyars*

Paniyars, spread across areas of North Kerala, Tamil Nadu and parts of Karnataka is a segment of the population whose culture marks a distinct trend. The origin of the group that constitutes around 45 percent of the total Scheduled Tribes in the district of Wayanad, is under dispute, though historians note that they might have been migrants from Kudagu district of Karnataka. Considering their unique physical features and racial affinities, anthropologists also ascribe the origin of the *Paniya* community to an African tribe that came to India after a shipwreck. Known for their traditionally established religious customs and practices, this community whose occupation largely revolves around agriculture was undoubtedly a major force that drove the economy of Kerala. With the passage of time, *Paniyars* are not hired for agricultural work, and are left poverty stricken and discriminated. The language of the *Paniyars* is called *paniyabhasha* which has no script but is a spoken language. Considering the lack of education, it is through the documentation of their culture which includes folk music, dance and religious rituals that the world gets to know about them. Having lived in close proximity to nature, their art, culture and religion are entwined with various elements of nature. Marriage ceremonies and death rituals follow specific codes and norms for the community that understate their particular beliefs and relationship with the otherworldly.

Distinct from others in terms of physical characteristics, lifestyle, cultural and traditional practices, they live in deeply deprived economic and social situations, ruled by poverty and unemployment. Traditionally employed as bonded labourers in agricultural lands of the upper castes, the *Paniyars* earned meagre wages and food for their existence. With the onslaught of

urbanisation and globalisation, their income suffered a huge set back. Research done on the socio-economic status of the tribal population reveals:

... alienation, displacement from traditional avenues of employment, ill health, erosion of traditional knowledge and culture, dwindling bio-diversity, denial of or restricted access to common property resources (CPR), lack of educational opportunities, gender inequity, sexual exploitation of and violence against women, alcoholism, and vulnerability due to socio-economic and political powerlessness.
(*Empowering Women in Agriculture* 52)

Since food is a cultural artefact, food offers perspectives into the socio-cultural aspects of a society. The livelihood of the *Paniya* community is centred on wandering from one place to another for the sole purpose of finding food resources. They are often being compared to birds with regard to their shifting livelihood changes. The methodology involving field visit was carried out to examine whether they carried a distinct culinary tradition and to observe as to how food played a role in reinforcing an identity for them. The study was also undertaken to examine the ways in which dalits viewed their food and to locate the position of food in sustaining their deprived situation. Food and food consumption mirror social life and behavioural patterns of a community and serve as an index of the general welfare of the society.

Subaltern Food Perspectives with Reference to *Paniyars* in North Kerala

The characteristic features of the *Paniya* community and food habits vary according to their employment status. The community doesn't own property of land and therefore build their shacks in forest belts according to land availability and food resources. Each settlement would contain five to six families, mostly connected by blood. There are no walls or boundaries that

separate the huts. Since it is not their private property, they are obliged to move or relocate anytime. Most of them earn their livelihood through meagre agricultural activities. If they are not hired for work, the men folk are left without jobs, while the women go in search of edibles in the forests. Women have a rich knowledge of the wild food plants and medicinal herbs, and therefore are constantly interviewed by ethno botanists and researchers from across the world. The community mostly live in the present with no hopes, aspirations or dreams for the future. Though the children are initially sent to school, they remain drop outs due to lack of interest in studies and discrimination they encounter at schools. Paniyars marry largely within their own community, though there are exceptions.

The number of drop outs in schools is extremely high which leads to a stagnancy in their socio-economic status. The influx of modern culture has seeped into their lives as is evident from the usage of electronic devices like mixer and television. *Paan* chewing is inevitable to *Paniyars*. Though all the members whom the researcher interacted followed the Hindu faith, they do not hold rigid religious beliefs. The community members do not think about their future and work only to meet their day to day expenses. The harvest of mushrooms or other produce are usually shared among family members living nearby and are not preserved for later usage. They are not keen on marketing or selling the produce that they cultivate which prevents them from earning money. Sweets are absent from their food domain and none particularly fancy them. They do not celebrate occasions of birthdays with special food or sweet dishes. When enquired about State festivals like *Onam*, they agreed that they do celebrate it. The *Paniyars* who live in close harmony with nature display huge respect for the biodiversity around them. The daughter in one of the houses confessed that her mother doesn't allow her to pluck the flowers that she grows outside the hut even for the *attappukkalam* (the traditional floral carpet spread on the floor) during *Onam*. Some families who

own cattle earn some money through selling milk. But their consumption of milk was limited to having just a glass of milk-based tea once a day. Most of them preferred black tea. Meals were taken together as a family. Television soap operas are enjoyed in those families with T.V sets. Everyone possessed mobile phones through which they enjoyed movies and songs.

Marriage ceremonies are a simple affair comprising of a knot tying at the temple followed by a feast. Those tribals who were economically advantaged preferred chicken biriyani for their marriage occasions, while the majority of the respondents whom the researcher interacted with said that raw materials for the dishes were brought in by all the guests as a form of gift, which would then be combined and made into the *sadya* (the meal comprising rice and different curries).

There are very few *Paniyars* who stick to their traditional clothing habits and accessories. Most of them have adapted to dress codes like saris, shirts, dhoti etc. The older generation understands the drawbacks that lack of education has caused in their lives and aspires for a brighter future for the younger generation. There was nothing they could take pride in.

Observations on Food Culture

The majority of the families the researcher observed cooked only a single meal. This involved rice and some curry sourced from the local plants. They kept the leftover food for the morning. They begin and end the day with *paan* chewing. *Paan* chewing forms an intrinsic part of their life, something they can't live without. The children who go to school are provided with meals as part of the mid-day meal programme. But most of them who drop out by sixth or eighth standard spend their time wandering around and sometimes helping their parents. This kind of living that goes on for generations has instilled a kind of contentment or gratification in spending

their life without any ambition to earn or to save. They are a happy lot with little or no worries. The men who indulge in alcoholism create brawls. Suicide rates among this community are large. Mortality rate is staggeringly low.

They didn't seem very keen on cooking and largely evaded questions regarding indigenous preparations. There could be observed a change from their traditionally recorded food customs. Erosion of cultural values can be attributed to their exposure to the outside world through their kids who go to college in the city and under the influence of television. The younger generation's lack of interest and enthusiasm for their custom could partly stem from their notion of a lower status their food is associated with by outsiders.

As far as their food is concerned, most of it was locally procured. Vegetables that were cultivated in their hut premises were largely used. They made a weekly purchase of essential items like curry powders, sugar, salt etc. Non vegetarian dishes like chicken and fish are relished and usage of beef is condemned. This included tubers, wild leaves and stems. Fish was caught from the water bodies that surround their huts. It was much relished and when they caught fish in abundance, they added it to anything that they cooked. Small crabs caught from the nearby lakes also occupied an important place in their culinary world.

The Problem of Hunger

Issues of hunger and poverty form the crux of existence for *Paniyars*. The little enthusiasm they displayed when asked about the food they cooked revealed the generation long fight against starvation and poverty, adapting them to live a life devoid of food. Most settlements did not own cattle as a result of which their diet showed a total absence of milk or milk products. Black tea with sugar is the only drink that they have.

Hunger looms large in the dalit experience as explicated in most dalit testimonials. A life of poverty is left with little to mend itself. Janabai Kachru Girhe in her autobiographical extract *Marankala* narrates the experiences of hunger. “But how would the fire in the stomach be extinguished without food? Abuse us or beat us. But give us morsels. Their string of abuses would increase, that string never broke. The fire in the stomach was never quelled. If it ever went down, it was after begging”. (qtd in *Writing Caste/ writing gender* 320)

Here we find how hunger takes on as a primary concern for the *gopal* community in Maharashtra who bear torture and discrimination in the struggle to get food. She also talks about her memories of *Padava* festival, when she accompanies her father to beg for food. Comparing the hunt for food that punctuates their existence to that of the dogs, Girhe writes about the incident of how they used to compete with the street dogs to get the leftover food from festivals and marriage occasions.

Staying away from food gives rise to many problems. Lethargy and malnourishment stalk the lives of most children that in turn force them to stop pursuing education. Children belonging to *Paniya* group were found to be extremely shy and the questions they were asked were largely met with blank stares. With just one meal and nothing else to supplement their hunger, they lived a life of ignorance, poverty and starvation. Hunger emerges as the major villain for the economically backward class of dalits, further giving rise to problems like illiteracy and ill health. The lack or unavailability of food resources makes the condition of the poor deplorable. Food security remains a problem that needs to be tackled for dalit communities like these where unemployment and financial crisis have taken a toll on their lives.

Amartya Sen points out that starvation and lack of food is not necessarily linked to lack of availability, but limited access to food resources. By studying famines in Bangladesh, Bengal, Sahel and Ethiopia, he illustrates that famines are not directly related to food shortages, but is dependent on a whole network of legal entitlements that determine individual's access to food. The hierarchy of caste plays a crucial role in determining access to food. It is ironic to note that while hordes of grains are stacked away in go-downs, the country's citizens are starving and dying of malnutrition and hunger.

The *Paniyars* whom the researcher interviewed met their hunger through what was available in their vicinity. It depended on the availability of raw materials and when they are met with lack of raw materials, their hunger is endured through *paan* chewing, which is a dangerous alternative.

Limited Food choices and Access to Food

Morton Fried distinguishes the concepts of ranking and stratification. He sees ranking as something that exists totally independent of the economic order. Stratification, on the other hand is limited to the differences in status based on economic differences. According to Fried, "Stratification is a term that is limited to status differences based on economic differences. A system by which the adult members of a society enjoy differential rights of access to basic resources. These resources are the physical things that sustain life". (Thurston 121)

Economic differences ensured that people across different castes do not enjoy equal access to essential resources. Caste system and religiously sanctioned rules embodying it ensured that economic inequality is maintained across different castes. Each strata of the society engaged in a

particular caste occupation from which they had no escape. Therefore, a huge disparity existed as far as their economic status was concerned. This led to differential access to resources among various castes. In this process, what is available to the dalits becomes their food and gets tied to their identity. It further attains a signification of denigration and inferiority. For example, a plate of gruel signifies poverty and low social status. Significations are constructed and used to maintain differences.

Roland Barthes discusses the process of signification that a food item generates in the context of the French society. Like language, a particular food is treated as a code that embodies meanings. In “Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption”, Barthes elaborates on how food acquires different levels of signification according to differences in production. He gives ample examples to show how significations work with food. Bread in two different forms signifies two different things. While brown bread is typically associated with a sense of refinement, white bread is seen as an ordinary foodstuff. Another example he gives is that of bitter chocolate, a taste largely found appetising amongst the rich. Carving out specific taste preferences was necessary to maintain class and caste distinctions. Construction of food significations distanced food from one another. Significations resulted in creating feelings of repulsion among people. Barthes sums up his arguments by saying that food communicates a whole range of meanings through its consumer. The consumer might not always adopt food as a substance to meet his energy requirement, but s/he may be signalling as well as experiencing various meanings through food. For example, consuming sweet substances connoted moments of leisure and promotion of happiness (29-32). Reading food parallel to differing notions of taste sheds light on the fundamental design on which inequality is based.

The diet of *Paniyars* lacked some of the most essential food like milk, curd, essential vegetables or fruits. While access to fruits and vegetables could be related to the lack of affordability, many other food items are conveniently ignored in their diet. The reasons for this may be lack of education and proper understanding of the nutritional needs of the body. The discrimination faced at markets or shops can be another reason they prefer not to buy many of the goods on a daily basis. Insults and humiliation are faced by the group at grocery stores and markets. They are looked down upon as unclean and as a source of pollution.

Douglas considers food as code which encodes specific messages that explain social relations played out in the domain of food. She says that "...the message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries" (*Food in the Social Order* 249). Placing the idea put forward by Douglas in the context of dalits' lack of availability of essential commodities, one finds that a framework of power that maintains a social hierarchy is at work in the functioning of public food distribution system. One finds a link between the access to food resources and social inequality. At various stages of food production, distribution and consumption, a micro politics is at work that ensures distribution of goods. The reasons determining food preferences are varied but the deep social class structure underlying formation and construction of tastes cannot be ignored at any cost.

Negative Constrains on Inaccessible Food

Accessibility is a major factor that determined the taste of the dalit population. The aversion towards food item that is inaccessible is a common observation among all cultures. This is particularly relevant in the context of the *Paniyars*. The food items like biriyani or ice cream that is totally out of their reach is invested with negative thoughts and attitudes. Food from hotels or

shops was not much fancied. They said they did not trust the frost filled, fancy looking cakes and other food items served in hotels or restaurants. They expressed utter disregard for inaccessible food and opine that they do not even want to taste it. They did not trust the ingredients, oil, *masala*, hygiene associated with the food they had no access to. They sounded very precautionous about the preservatives and chemicals used in the food products that could be harmful to one's health.

Warren Belasco, noted food scholar asserts, "If we are what we eat, we are also what we don't eat. People moralize constantly about what they will and will not eat. To eat is to distinguish and discriminate, include and exclude. Food choices establish boundaries and borders" (*Food Matters 2*). The property of food to demarcate is particularly significant in the lives of the dalits because what they ate became a site of rebuke or disgrace.

Since taste is inextricably linked to a person's identity and has been developed over the course of a long time, correction of taste becomes an ardent task. In the French context, lot of efforts were undertaken to correct the tastes of the working classes which was deprived of sweetness. Firstly the notion of sweet as a luxury product had to be broken down and sugar had to be constructed as a common everyday food substance that is required to fuel one's energy levels. Revision of taxes on sugar or the spread of awareness about the need to consume sugar could not help the working class change their taste preferences. Other channels of taste formation and mechanisms of habituation had to be adopted. For this, the army provided an efficient means. Military administration ensured that sugar based diets are including the diets of the soldiers. This is how taste was inculcated among the working classes of France who adamantly refused to have sweet food in their diets for a very long time.

Food preferences are part of one's lifestyle. Since lifestyle is inextricably tied to one's identity, bringing about a change in tastes are difficult. Historical studies on particular food like

sugar and potato have shown that dietary changes bring about social changes. It was when potato was introduced to the diet of the Europeans that, problems of famines and mortality rates could be cut down to abysmal rates. The vast calories that potato provided improved the well-being of the people, which in turn paved way to industrialisation.

Denial to Accept Food-taboos and Superstitions

Ideas about purity and impurity form the core of most food taboos. Doughlas in her work *Purity and Danger* notes that concepts like purity and pollution seem timeless and unchanging across cultures (5). In the religious context, what one religion proclaims as a taboo might be different from that of another. *Kosher, halal, jatka* concepts arose from differences in purity construction among Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. Similar is the way taboos function across cultures. A food considered disgusting in one cultural context would be a delicious option when placed in another cultural context. Dietary demarcations pave way to fragmentation and separation of societal interactions. Borders and cultural boundaries become strong as a result of abject differences in food taboos.

Taboos do not rule the culinary habits of the *Paniyars*. Their tastes are ruled by pure necessity. The fact that the tribals do not ascribe to any particular religious belief can be traced back to the history of their long struggle for survival. Just like the untouchable *Shudras* who had to feed on dead cattle to meet their nutritional needs out of necessity and convenience, the tribes let go of stringent religious customs and satisfy their hunger through the food available to them. Speaking about the food culture of the *Paniyars* in the context of food taboos, one observes a conspicuous absence of food related taboos and etiquettes. Shell fish, crab and other insects are therefore not desecrated in their dietary choices. The overpowering need for survival pushes them to lead a life lived on impulse and momentary joys. The traditional religion being animism, the

tribals are found worshipping gods from different religious denominations. The dalit community interviewed for this study was Hindus who also prayed to gods of other religions like Christianity.

Fasting, Feasting and food offerings

The notion of fasting assumes two different perspectives when placed in economically diverse and opposite backgrounds. As far as the poor are concerned, fasting is looked at as the effect of their deprived circumstances- something they are forced to observe out of their poverty. But when a non-dalit observes fasting, the depravity of food is looked upon as self-restraint that brings about spiritual and mental cleansing. Reading fasting or food restrains against the dalit and non-dalit backgrounds helps one relook at food and food rituals as they are used to circulate stereotypical values and social norms.

The concept of feasting and fasting fulfil specific functions according to the Hindu social order. Feasting connotes a celebratory tone and signals wealth and prosperity in varied degrees. Feasting in the context of dalits exists on two different planes. Similar is the case with fasting. While fasting is traditionally regarded as a form of asceticism, it acquires a different hue once placed in a dalit's life. For them, it becomes a pattern to be followed in a life punctuated by poverty.

Louis Dumont in his *Homo Hierarchicus* states that Indian classification of food is related to the classification of people based on their birth status. Appadurai also notes his observations on fasting and feasting in his work *Gastropolitics in Hindu South Asia*. He looks at feasting as connoting generosity and fasting as a form of asceticism. The differences observed across different castes in terms of fasting and feasting signal caste affiliations, social mobility, gender dimensions etc. Appadurai also mentions *jajmani* system, which is an economic system where lower castes performed various functions for upper castes and received grain in return. Appadurai analysed

South Asia as a highly stratified, agrarian economy with its division of labour and unequal distribution of agrarian resources brought about by distinctions in caste. (500-511)

Paniyars observe fasting during death rituals. Days after the death of a family member are spent eating bland food. A part of the food is also kept aside for the departed and to prevent the soul from loitering near the house premises. On occasions of marriage which is an affair that lasts two or more days, the boy's family is expected to give the girl a bride price that includes around three packs of paddy. Since food takes on the primary position of power and status that defines the wealth of a community, it is exchanged as gifts, used as bride price, wedding gifts and divine offerings and as a symbol of unity and solidarity. This underlines the importance of food in their lives. The guests who come to grace the occasion of marriage bring along with them small quantities of rice, grains and other vegetables that add up to form the marriage feast. Thus, food occupies an all- pervasive role in the lives of the *Paniyars*.

Bourdieu in his *Distinction* talks about 'the taste of necessity' that rules the palate of the lower class. He based his theory of social inequality by studying lifestyles of various classes and argues that those with economic constraints are restricted in their consumption patterns and are therefore unable to develop a specific taste ("Lifestyles in Distressed Neighbourhoods" 24-44). As opposed to 'the taste of luxury' that characterises food of complex and rich societies, 'taste of necessity' is devoid of choices, variety or freedom.

The concept of food sharing is very strong among dalits. Food sharing helps maintain solidarity among the members of the community. Raw materials that are procured and the food that is cooked are always shared with the members of the neighbouring families. The community spirit that runs strong can be ascribed to their common longing for food, something that their whole

livelihood is based on. Each colony or settlement has their own worshipping spaces that house their family deity. Rice flakes, coconut shavings and banana are commonly used as *prasad* in these worship spaces. Prayer and worship form an important part of their existence.

The Culture of *Paan* chewing

Paan chewing occupies the essence of the lives of the *Paniyars*. Their hunger cravings are mostly repressed through *paan* chewing. Years of *paan* chewing have made them victims of *paan* addicts. Whatever little money they earn is spent on buying *paan*. Even children chew *paan* without the knowledge of their parents. The link between hunger and *paan* chewing is well evident. To spend a day toiling and wandering for food in the hills, *paan* chewing energises them, keeps them alert and fills them with life. Though the children are not introduced to the habit, they gradually acquire it from their parents or friends.

Considering the endemic role of *paan* in the lives of the *Paniyars*, it is important to examine chewing of *paan* as a cultural expression of this dalit community. The act of consuming a particular food as a means of asserting one's distinct cultural identity and celebration of their life is a significant cultural phenomena. *Paan* assumes a dominant position in the culinary narrative of the tribals due to various reasons. The importance that it enjoys can be fathomed through its use in other ceremonies and occasions. *Paan* is exchanged as a token of love between the boy and girl before marriage amongst the *Paniyars*.

Louis Dumont's idea of pollution and purity can be read alongside the *Paniya* tribe's culture of *paan* chewing. The public perception that holds dalit life as unclean, unhygienic, uncivilised and barbaric had a lot to do with the food they consume and hold dear. Discriminating

them as an ignorant lot with no concept of a healthy lifestyle is the norm. The *Paniyars* are often blamed and despised for spitting *paan* juices and dirtying the surroundings.

Literatures abound on the ill effects of *paan* when used over a long period of time. But, the importance that *paan* holds for this tribal population is immense to be tossed aside as a cancer causing or a polluting substance that dirties public spaces. *Paan* forms an important food element in the foodscape of many dalits as it could be observed from its representations in various cultures. Culture is defined as a set of shared customs, skills, ideas and values, transmitted socially from one generation to other. It is a learned behaviour that is socially acquired. In this light, food holds an all-encompassing significance and value for each community. Paan has deep significance as a cultural artefact that defines the lives of these dalits.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* includes excerpts that underline the importance of *paan* in their cultural life. Kamble describes the *haldi* ceremony before a marriage thus:

“The group of girls, called karavalis, from both the bride and the groom's side, would carry small purses full of betel leaves. They would prepare paan and keep offering them to the bride and the groom. The karavalis too would keep chewing the paan.” (*The Prisons We Broke* 88). Kamble also mentions an incident from the marriage ceremony where betel nut occupies the prime position. It is considered a game to be played between the bride and the groom.

“...two brass plates full of haldi and kunkum would be kept before the couple. Two betel nuts would be dropped in the plates. First, the groom had to hold a betel nut tightly with two fingers of his left hand. The bride was supposed to prise the betel nut out of his grip. This ritual was repeated three times. Then the act was reversed.

It was the bride's turn now to hold a betel nut.... She would lock her fingers, holding the betel nut tightly in her palm". (90)

For the *Paniyars* of Wayanad, *paan* forms an important part of their cultural existence. It is a food item that they look forward to with so much eagerness. Aware of the health hazards that long term *paan* chewing brings forth, they turn a blind eye towards it. Community spirit is forged through *paan* chewing that accompanies their daily wanderings in search of raw materials, chit chats, moments of happiness, love, despair and hunger. The stigmatisation of the community as a *paan* chewing, dirty, uncultured, quarrelsome, unwilling to learn and change overlooks the fact of hunger, which looms large in the kitchens of each of their households as well as in the faces of the kids, women and men.

Alcoholism, Brawls and Suicides

Alcohol is consumed by the male members of the community regularly, while the females are not very fond of it. Alcoholism did not exist in the beginning. It began at a later stage when the land owners started persuading and enticing the tribals with the lure of alcohol. Even when they are no more in the clutches of their masters now, they still are under the mastery of researchers, film and documentary makers who gift them with alcohol as reward for documenting their lives and knowledge. Documenting their culture by zooming in on the exotic aspect of it or exhibiting their cultural uniqueness would not be resourceful if it overlooks the reality of poverty that defines the life of the majority of the tribal community.

As they became addicted to alcohol, they turned to alcohol as means of merry making and fun. All their money is spent on alcohol. It becomes a craving that has overtaken their prime concern for food. Research has shown a direct correlation between the increasing use of alcohol

and economic depravity. The researcher's observation of the community also proves that most suicides and brawls are a direct consequence of excessive use of alcohol. Shanthi Ranganathan, founder of T.T Ranganathan Clinical Research Foundation, Chennai, notes a direct link between alcohol consumption, poverty and suicide rates. She argues that poverty could be eliminated by reducing alcohol usage among members of the lower strata of the society. Through her research programmes, she found that curbing alcohol usage among men resulted in economic improvement and a decrease in domestic violence. ("Road to Poverty" 27)

Disregard for 'sweetness' and milk products

A significant disregard for sweet substances and dairy products was observed among the *Paniyars*. Even during celebratory functions, sweet dishes were not preferred. The reason for this could be traced to the lack of affordability they faced initially, paving way to their tastes getting acclimatised to an absence of sugar. So, even when sugar became an affordable substance, their lack of preference led to a total avoidance of, and aversion towards sugar. Studies have proved that bringing about changes in tastes is a difficult task. It includes a change in one's lifestyle choices.

Having been denied experiences of a sweet palate from a very early stage in history, the dalit taste gets attuned to its absence. Sugar and sweetness were culturally constructed as a luxury product. Significations of power, wealth and happiness were bound in sugar and therefore used as a strategy to separate the lower class through heavy taxation and limited access at one point in history.

Kannada writer Hanumanthaiah notes in his "Wedding Lamps on Holey Street", "Many in our caste feel revulsion towards milk, curd and buttermilk, which they have never tasted. To this day, I feel like throwing up when I see someone eating rice with milk. A friend from my caste

has distaste for curd. I have seen countless people who develop an aversion to foods they have, or had, no access to”. (387)

Social factors play an important role in deciding one’s taste preferences. Most of the economically underprivileged classes couldn’t afford to have sweetening agents in their diets. Therefore, lack of accessibility led them to develop an aversion towards the sweet taste. The absence of sugar in the diet is the result of not just economic backwardness, but a confluence of factors including the cultural construction of sugar as a symbol of luxury and power and the strategic method adopted to exclude it from the diets of the lower castes. This was done through taxations and prohibitions ensured that dalit do not participate in the culinary experience of the upper castes. R. S Khare illustrates the concept of a meal cycle where sugar is considered the highest of all tastes. (*Eternal Food* 223)

Bourdieu also makes a distinction between ‘taste of luxury’ and ‘taste of necessity’ in his Introduction to *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, where he explains that it is the most economical of the foods that favours the taste of necessity, while the taste of luxury focuses its attention on the manner of presentation, serving and the eating of food, denying the primary function of it. He also ascribes the quality of freedom to the foods associated with the taste of luxury.

“Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classification is expressed or betrayed”. (*Distinction* 6)

Bourdieu considers taste as a 'social weapon' that separates the high from the low, the sacred from the profane and the legitimate from the illegitimate in matters ranging from food and drink, cosmetics, music, literature, newspapers etc. He incorporates the most mundane, yet functional items of culture in his analysis of tastes.

Separation of tastes was an important aspect since taste forms part of one's lifestyle and it is lifestyle choices that equate status and power. Sweet taste was considered a luxury for a long time and was used to ascertain the superiority that certain classes identified themselves with. The constructed meanings revolving around sweet food items are aplenty. The lack of a sweet palate and a disposition for the spicy food were noted among all the members, irrespective of gender or age.

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