

**‘Food’ as Dalit Identity with Reference to a Dalit Community in
Northern Kerala: A Study**

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DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation titled **“‘Food’ as Dalit Identity with Reference to a Dalit Community in Northern Kerala: A Study,”** submitted by me is a record of bona fide work carried out under the supervision of **Dr. Sanjiv Kumar.**

I further declare that the work reported in this dissertation has not been submitted, either in part or in full, for any other degree in any other institute or University.

Place:

Date:

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled “‘Food’ as Dalit Identity with Reference to a Dalit Community in Northern Kerala: A Study,” is based on the bona fide research carried out by **Ms. Jereene Sarah George**, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central University of Haryana, under my supervision and submitted to Central University of Haryana in partial fulfilment for the award of *Master of Philosophy* in English.

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Dr. Sanjiv Kumar

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(Jerene Sarah George)

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Introduction

Studying cultural artefacts, art forms or objects of everyday social existence gained recognition with the growth of cultural studies. The question of power and ideology embedded in socio-political structures came to be addressed when the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies delved into daily occurrences of life. Raymond Williams, the Welsh Marxist critic who undertook extensive Marxist readings on culture and civilization, considers the word 'culture' amongst the most complicated two or three words in the English language. Culture is a complex whole that is made up of knowledge, values, art, morals, beliefs, laws and customs that a society is tied with. The growing discontent with the establishment and the ferment that the Western society was in during the 1960s led the progressive thinkers, students and academicians to rethink on the established set of ideas on which rests culture. It was with the establishment of Frankfurt school during the inter war period along with the pioneering contribution of Richard Hoggart, Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer and various others that the discipline of cultural studies took roots.

Stuart Hall, the Jamaican born cultural theorist who rejected the notion of culture as that to be appreciated, had immense influence in shaping many minds. Hall investigated spaces of culture where unjust power relations reside. Some of the works that moulded cultural studies include Williams' *Culture and Society*, *Keywords*, *The Long Revolution*, Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and E.P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. The concept of 'Culture Industry' propounded by Adorno and Horkheimer explains how the consumerist, capitalist culture becomes the breeding ground for production of art on a large scale.

Popular culture that looks at a wide spectrum ranging from objects and places of entertainment to digital culture and hyper reality forages into unexplored territories, shedding light on commonplace, yet ignored corners of what can be called the complex block of 'culture'. Researching popular culture offers wide opportunities for cultural theorists and scholars. This makes socio- religious institutions that are built on the labyrinths of power, the central focus of cultural analysis and scrutiny for scholars of cultural studies. The lines between high and low culture, elite and marginalised art get increasingly blurred as studies and research in cultural studies look at the underlying aesthetic of art. The Arnoldian notion of culture as that which is the best known and thought in the world comes in for a toss when the world of subaltern culture based on oral myths is unwrapped. The possibility of alternate aesthetics and art paves way to reconsidering spaces of art.

John Story, in his book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* lays down different definitions through which popular culture comes to be looked at. He sees popular culture as a field accommodating texts and practices that fail to meet the required standards to qualify as high culture. He mentions Raymond Williams whose notion of a text is made up of different cultural forces namely the dominant, emergent and the residual. He also identifies a link between the articulation of a particular cultural force with the social circumstances and historical conditions of production and consumption (6-11). Within the folds of popular culture lie multifarious subcultures, behaviours, attitudes and trends that catch on with the populace. Research on popular culture scratches beneath the patina of social media, entertainment shows, reality programmes, pop music, graffiti paintings, street plays, cyber space and magazines.

Food, that remained unrecognised as a subject of research till the early part of the nineteenth century attained scholarly interest with the investigation of culture turning its attention to ordinary aspects of life. From its role in defining one's identity and culture to its ability to unify and demarcate communities, food reflects multiple aspects of an individual and a community. Drawing from Bourdieu who considers food to be a marker of social status and class, food has been taken up as a source to understand power relations arising from distinction in tastes that rules class differences. Food undoubtedly mirrors a person's social, emotional, economical, religious and political identity. Food gained attention and popularity on various platforms of media over the recent years, thus occupying a significant position in the field of popular culture.

Studies on food got a boost with the spurt in various food industries that placed food at the centre of cultural enquiry. The profusion of cookery books, food blogs and magazines, food narratives and articles, cookery channels and reality shows on television, celebrity chefs, and food-centric movies testify the growing value and interest that food has attained over the recent years. Concepts like 'food porn', a term coined by the feminist critic Rosalind Coward are ruling the elite food industry that gives overriding importance to the presentation and indulgence of food. Food-spaces like coffee houses and restaurants began to be seen as spaces of consumption that promote a certain cultural taste or experience.

Globalisation and the wide spread attention that food industry has garnered over the recent years have lead to the breaking of food barricades. Hierarchies break when people from different social groups share their food. People's interest in knowing another's culture through food has increased over the recent years. Food

offers the sole experience of tasting an alien culture. This is the prime reason why food permeates travel narratives.

The discipline of food studies looks beyond the mere quality of food as a nutritional requirement and integrates its concerns with that of anthropology, history, cultural studies, economics and sociology, making it an interdisciplinary field of study. Food history speculates the history of food and studies the cultural, sociological, economical impacts of food. Food historians identify food as a relevant medium to understand the social structure of a society. It was in the late 1970s and 80s that anthropologists started looking at food as a symbolic substance that was embedded in meanings. Paul Levy, British author and journalist who, along with Ann Barr shares credit for the coinage of the popular word 'foodie', considers Michael Pollen's *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation*, written in 2013 as a major work that would shape the discipline of food studies. With an array of books, journals, and conferences dedicated to the studies on food and many universities adopting it as a discipline, food has acquired a status of much critical enquiry. With the first food journal *Petits Propos Culinaires*, published in 1979 and the first conference on food Oxford Food Symposium held in 1981, research on food has engaged academicians and scholars for over three decades.

Food centric narratives are breaking new grounds in the literary scenario. Food that figures in literary texts can no more be dismissed as insignificant and its ability to offer a rich understanding of the cultural context in which the text is placed cannot be underestimated. R.S Khare's contribution to the field has been immense. His work provides an in depth understanding into the working of food on the society and the individual. Arjun Appadurai also made significant contribution to the area of food studies by delving deep into the unexplored territory of cookbooks.

As a deeply layered system of significations, food echoes the pulse of the community that feeds on it. Like language, food symbolises meanings that differ according to the context. This arbitrary nature of food invests a particular food with contradictory notions or beliefs. Thus food becomes a site of conflicts. The nature of food to break apart and bind social relations and community ties invests food with multiplicity of meanings and significations. Food figures predominantly in literature of the diaspora because of its ability to connect one to their roots. Food, a repository of one's collective cultural identity offers the space to re-enact the longings and memories of migrants and those in exile. This is the reason why family reunions and gatherings take on special significance for those struggling to come to terms with their hyphenated identities and cultures. Food becomes the site through which cultures and experiences cross and intermingle. Literature, movies and documentaries that adopt food as a character explore multiple dimensions of food. Emotions and situations find a representation through food. Salman Rushdie uses the metaphor of pickles and chutneys to talk about memories and history in his much acclaimed novel *Midnight's Children*. Through Rushdie, the reader also learns the powerful impact that a particular food item can have on an individual. It is when Saleem Sinai tastes a particular chutney that he is reconnected to old places and people. Emotions are infused strongly into the layers of food that it resurfaces every time you taste it. Scholars who have worked extensively on food include Sidney Mintz, Mary Douglas, R. S Khare, Jack Goody, Louis Dumont, Warren Belasco, Jeffrey Pilcher, McKim Marriott etc.

The central role that food plays in religion is indisputable. Dietary laws prescribed in each religion calls attention to differing notions of purity and impurity. Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism have clearly defined

dietary rules. Disparity in eating habits and food choices becomes a convenient way of excluding people from sharing meals, which is an expression of intimacy and kinship. People use food to express one's faith. Religious festivities like Diwali, Ramzan and Christmas are celebrated with feasts where food and food sharing take on primary importance.

Even though the origin of caste system and untouchability is disputable, food undeniably had a tremendous influence on the way caste system was shaped in Indian society. Food was used as a powerful device for segregating people belonging to different religious and caste affiliations. The prohibition on inter-dining tightened the noose of casteism. Untouchables, the section of the population that falls outside the four fold division of caste hierarchy were humiliated and condemned in numerous ways. Just as people were divided on the lines of caste, food too fell into the evil web of casteism. Prescriptions bordering on strict religious dietary laws ensured lack of free mingling across different social and religious groups. At the same time, these laws brought together members sharing the same cultural values together, fostering a sense of intense solidarity and community spirit in them.

With the growing attention on dalits and the marginalised sections of the population, their customs and cultural practices get recognised, studied and explored. The study of marginalised cultures opens doors to previously unexplored aspects of dalit lives, and helps one understand their struggle against an oppressive, caste-conscious society. Dalit literature being produced by the representatives of the community across India has played a vital role in bringing dalit concerns and experiences to the forefront. This paved way to alternate readings of canonical texts from a dalit perspective and a subversion of established notions of art and aesthetics. By not paying enough attention to dalit histories, we are shrouding a major part of a

culture that makes up a diverse and multicultural society. Dalit voices get heard only through an exploratory study of their distinct cultural practices. The centuries old inhuman discrimination and violent injustice meted out to dalits go largely unnoticed in history when their presence is shunned in the chronicled history. With cultural studies embracing elements of folklore, popular culture, theatre and mass media, food becomes a fitting subject to understand and interrogate culture.

Food is the most pervasive element in a person's daily life and has played a supreme role in important phases of history like industrialisation and globalisation. When the interest in food gets limited to the domain of nutrition and biological sciences, a whole cultural realm that controls and sustains social relations is being trivialised. Food studies, that adopts an interdisciplinary stand, drawing from anthropological, sociological, historical, psychological perspectives dwells on critical threads and dimensions of each of these disciplines.

The essence of dalit experiences is retained to a great extent in folk music, dance, ritualistic performances and food habits that are passed down through generations, and are treasure troves of knowledge about the dalit community. The knowledge gleaned through these sources offers a clear understanding of their experiences, thus adding to the existing domain of dalit literature and enriching the growing discipline of dalit studies. To study dalit experiences, food can turn a rich and evocative medium. With notions of purity and impurity deeply entrenched in food, a study of the food choices and dietary habits of communities separated across caste lines offers insights into the mechanism and propagation of caste hierarchy. Food embodies a personality of its own when placed in the socio- economic lives of dalits. Food consumed routinely, food cooked on special occasions like birth, marriage and death, the most relished food, food associated with festivities, food

related taboos or prescriptions, the notion of fasting, food related to the divine, when studied in a dalit context offer a clear understanding of the lives of dalits. Throwing light on each of these aspects of food would help one understand the struggles undergone by dalits against caste based oppression and untouchability.

The research attempts to address the concept of dalit food by looking at the representations of food in dalit narratives and by tracing the role of food in building a dalit identity over the years. A cross sectional study of the food of *Paniyars*, a dalit community in Kerala, is undertaken as part of the methodology to gain a preliminary understanding of dalit food culture. Considering the diversity of dalit communities that exist in Kerala, 'dalit food' cannot be taken to represent the entire community. By shedding light on the culinary world of a dalit community in Kerala that continues to face discrimination, the research hopes to give a small perspective into the concept of dalit food. By focussing on the striking food choices and habits of a particular dalit community, the paper does not hope to generalise those as features of a common dalit cuisine. The larger concern of poverty and discrimination is what the research tries to locate through the everyday aspect of food.

The dissertation is divided into five sections. The introductory chapter introduces the interdisciplinary field of food studies and mentions the recent trends of research along with the leading practitioners in the domain. It also details the characteristic features of food that make it the subject of research enquiry. The introductory chapter concludes with the relationship of food and the marginalised in the Indian context.

Chapter one of the paper examines the history of untouchability through food by looking at various instances from the pre and post independent India riddled with

the violent history of casteism. It examines how food taboos, notions of purity and hygiene work in a society based on strict caste laws. The perpetuation of discrimination through religious scriptures that prescribe strict dietary laws is examined. The concept of leftovers as it exists in Hindu scriptures is also traced. Food prohibitions in various forms with references to the concept of inter-dining are looked at with examples from Indian history. Contribution of various reformists like Bhimrao Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule are incorporated along with their role in bringing about dalit emancipation. The chapter ends with illustrative examples from Indian context that portray socio- historical dimensions of food.

Chapter two titled, *Deciphering Marginal Food Dialects: Dalit Food Narratives*, comprises of a literature review of food narratives from selected dalit autobiographies, stories and poems. This includes excerpts from Bama, Sivakami, Sharankumar Limbale, Arjun Dangle, Urmila Pawar, Hanumanthaiah etc. These narratives are further substantiated with theories of social stratification, purity and pollution, formation of tastes and identity. Theoretical perspectives from Mary Douglas, R. S Khare, Bourdieu and Barthes are included to validate the concepts.

Chapter three is titled *Dalit Kitchen: Subaltern Food Perspectives*. In this chapter, the survey conducted by the researcher is explained as part of the primary methodology. The characteristic features involving food habits of the *Paniyars* are noted down as observations of the field visit. The chapter also mentions secondary methodology that involves use of an interdisciplinary approach to study the role of food in shaping social structure and human relationships.

The Conclusion sums up theoretical insights gathered from all the three chapters. It touches upon the role of food in shaping a dalit identity. It also presents an

overview of how dalit cuisine has come to be represented in food industry and dalit academia.

Through the thesis, the importance to analyse social inequalities and tensions through the prism of food is called for. A society's dietary behaviour and norms place attention on its social make up. Historical evidences prove that shifting patterns of social structures are brought about through changes in dietary habits. Food can be used not only as a tool to understand social problems but also to offer solution for the many problems. Therefore food that cuts across all disciplinary boundaries recommends immense possibilities in the field of research.

Chapter 1

Social Stratification, Food and Untouchability

Casteism is a major concern that India of the twenty first century struggles with on a daily basis. Vedic period that extends from 1500 to 500 BCE saw the settlement of Indo Aryans to Northern India. With them were brought the culture and traditions that slowly integrated with the pre-existing culture of India. It is believed that the *varna* system emerged during this period. Invention of tools led to a proliferation in agricultural activities, and the division of estates further helped strengthen the four- fold *varna* system.

The history of untouchability in India shows a violent, brutal form of discrimination that bordered on differences in birth status. A person's life, occupation, social acceptability revolved around the caste that s/he was born into. The stratification into Brahmin, Kshathriya, Vaishya and Shudra ensured fixed duties and cultural norms for people. The untouchables who were considered the atishudras and were kept out of the mainstream led a sub human existence at the mercy of those who occupied higher positions in the caste hierarchy. Thus being pushed to the societal margins, they had to abide by the rigid laws prescribed and sanctioned by religious texts, which ensured the pitiable continuance of their plight. Food became a major tool to separate and distinguish different castes.

G. L Sharma in his chapter on "Food and Caste System" in the work *Caste, Class and Social Inequality in India* argues that there was no distinction on the basis of food across different castes in the *varna* hierarchy during Vedic times. He argues that all the castes followed the same food choices and customs. It was when the Upanishadic and the Buddhist criticism were directed against the Brahmins, that the

‘varna-vyavastha’ began to lose its ground. With the caste system toppling down, Brahmins started losing their social prestige. This led the Brahmins to think of ways to protect their respectable and prestigious position in the caste hierarchy. Food was chosen as a convenient weapon to segregate others who occupied positions lower to Brahmins in the caste order. Food became part of their agenda to reconstitute and reshape the social structure. Various scriptures like the *Dharmashastras* and *Dharmasutras* were composed during the age of the Vedas. It is interesting to note that these scriptures were created by the priestly class in order to strengthen their hold and to distinguish themselves as pure and sacred. Dietary rules, prohibitions on food choices found a place among these texts. (175-180)

With the growing exploitation, violence and prejudices against the untouchables, it is crucial to examine the deep frameworks that are responsible for the segregation of people. B.R Ambedkar, hailed as the leader of the dalits, in his essay, “Slaves and Untouchables” argues:

...untouchability is obligatory....Once he is born an Untouchable, he is subject to all the disabilities of an Untouchable....In untouchability, there is no escape. Once an untouchable always an untouchable.... A deprivation of a man’s freedom by an open and direct way is a preferable form of enslavement. It makes the slave conscious of his enslavement and to become conscious of slavery is the first and the most important step in the battle for freedom....Untouchability is an indirect form of slavery. (15)

Ambedkar considers endogamy, which ensures that bonds are not formed among members across castes to be the main reason for caste system to persist. Ambedkar

also regards food to hold chief agency in the formation of the caste-ridden Indian society. The food of the untouchables was invested with notions of impurity, dirt and pollution. Occupation is another deciding factor that invested notions of impurity and dirt on the dalits. *Bhangis, Mahars, Dhors, Chambars, Malas, Madigas* are the caste groups whose traditional occupation revolved around clearing of carcasses, human and animal waste, serving as watchmen, sweeping roads and public places, handling animal hides etc. Elimination of dirt that the society expels becomes the sole responsibility of those occupying the lower social strata. The constant contact with the materials deemed unhygienic came to be linked with their habit or way of life. The *Mahars* or the *Bangis* whose traditional occupation prevented them from engaging in any other work maintained the most deplorable status in the society. Thus they came to be looked down by others as filthy and impure. Similar was the condition of the *Chandalas*.

G. S Ghurye analyses the segregation of *Chandalas* through prohibition of food vessels used by them. The *Chandalas*, whose traditional occupation required them to dispose of corpses and undertake unclaimed corpses, suffered the worst discrimination. According to Patanjali, the ancient grammarian, food vessels used by carpenters, black-smiths, washer-men and weavers could be used by other groups after cleansing them in a particular way. But the food- vessels used by the *Chandalas* and *Mritapas* could not be used by others because no kind of cleansing was considered to adequately purify the vessels. (311-312)

Meat of dead cattle became a convenient food option for most dalits who fight hunger. Meat-eating could be ascribed to their limited access to other food options and heavy taxation of essentials along with the forced labour that their caste entitled them to perform. Meat became part of their culinary experience through their journey

of struggle for survival. When battles on meat eating are fought, it is note-worthy to remember the history of untouchability and the situations that forced dalits to follow dietary choices that later became part of their relished taste. Accessibility ruled taste preferences and the lack of choices led them to eat what they came across. When the food that was sidelined by the society became the object of survival for the dalits, the particular food took on paramount significance in their cultural life. Followed for generations, these food choices become a part of their lifestyle and identity. Food also occupies a place of importance in creating solidarity and bondage among dalits.

The contribution of Jotirao Phule (1827-90) is commendable in the sphere of dalit liberation, considering his role in the anti-Brahmin movement which flourished in Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. Phule, who belonged to the caste of gardeners, was instrumental in uniting and organising the *Mahars* against the oppressive forces of the society. He started a school in 1853 for the *Mahars*, thus breaking new grounds and paving way for the emancipation of dalits. Phule, influenced by Western thinkers like Thomas Paine believed in personal freedom and equality as the fundamental values of a human being. By comparing the situation of the untouchables to that of the Africans in the American society, Phule thought of ways in which slavery in the form of untouchability could be wiped out in the Indian context. He founded the *Satyashodak Samaj* (Society for the Search of Truth) in 1873 to bring together all the untouchables under one roof. Phule's influence was tremendous in shaping social and political consciousness among dalits, so that by the time Ambedkar arrived on the public space, the ground was ripe for his activities to spread across the masses.

Mahars who received education and have internalised the reasons for their enslaved position in the society wanted to eliminate it by all costs and means. Some of them started changing their ways and emulated the ways of the Brahmins. Relinquishing

meat was one such way of doing so. *Mahars* who realised that *baluta* (the meagre remuneration received in return for their work) and *vatan* (a small piece of land given to them free of tax as reward for their work) systems were root causes for their deprived status, began renouncing those as part of their mission to overcome discrimination. There were even movements where *Mahars* refused to do their caste bound duties, which resulted in social boycotts. (Jaffrelot 15- 25)

Dalits were cut back from the society through prohibition on activities that fostered social bonding. Inter dining was ruled out on all costs because of this very reason. Marriage ceremonies and other functions had to be conducted in a certain way and they were restrained from public spaces. Rules on clothing and housing were imposed on them, and taxation on necessary goods prevented them from accessing even some basic necessities. All these factors prevented dalits from escaping their wretched condition and positioned them in a socially pitiable state. These rules also played a remarkable role in maintaining the social position of the upper strata. Restriction on a cultural sphere that includes the above mentioned facts over a long period of time forcefully created for the dalits a culture that they unconsciously adopted and later became a part of their existence. Tastes and preferences were shaped in this cultural context. Food choices were moulded in such an environment. Boundaries are cemented and identities are reinforced when one is denied access to a particular food. When Hindu scriptures and texts like *Manusmriti* ascribe different sets of rules for different castes, hierarchical boundaries were placed on food and dietary choices. Food was employed to maintain caste distinctions.

M. N Srinivas, while talking about *Sanskritisation*, regards food as a domain that needs reconsideration and reshaping of notions of purity and impurity for surpassing rigid categorisation based on ideological orientation. Food becomes an important

element in their lives since their survival or existence is inextricably tied to meeting their hunger. Wages were given in the form of food to the untouchables so that their immediate needs are met. Food transactions gave way to innumerable problems. Food had witnessed many battles in the name of untouchability. The untouchables faced brutal discrimination that revolved around food. Purchasing, eating and cooking were bound by restrictions imposed by those who ruled the society. The dalits had no freedom of choice over the food that they consumed. India has had a rigid casteist social makeup that considered even the sight of an untouchable the reason for the upper caste to consider his food polluted. Even the post- independent India is witness to stratification laws based on food. The dismissal of dalit cooks from *anganwadis* for fear that the food cooked by an untouchable would pollute the sanctity of the higher castes, separate eating arrangements in hotels or restaurants and in schools, inclusion or exclusion of certain food in food festivals or ceremonies are some of the cases in point.

In ancient India, commensality was the basis on which caste system thrived. The ban on inter-dining and inter- caste marriages ensured that free mingling across castes does not happen and discrimination persists. As pointed out by Ranbir Chandra:

Social inter- mingling through meals and marriage are experiences of purest proximity and kinship. It is a projection and affirmation of belonging together: and implicit recognition of the equal worth of all those who share the meal. The ban on inter- dining is therefore a powerful means for keeping social sentiments and religious sects apart from each other. The taboo against inter-dining is a clever conspiracy of fragmentation and a psychological ritual mechanism of division. It seeks to foster a mindset of prejudice and rejection. How powerful a

social reality stand(s) can be measured by the immense gratitude and encouragement that the dalits...experience when someone from the upper caste background shares meals with them. It is felt as a socially liberating and affirmative step. (110)

Savarkar is the first Indian who started the inter-dining ceremonies and is also remembered for having opened a cafe for all. He considers prohibition on inter-dining to be one of the seven shackles that bind the Indian society. Sharing of food or commensality constitutes an important place in cementing social relationships and strengthening social bonds. When people from across various castes and classes dine together, hierarchy between them is broken, giving rise to a sense of equality and brotherhood. Pointing out the inequality that exists among various castes of the untouchables, Savarkar suggests the need for the *Mahars*, *Bhangis*, *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas* to dine together, in order to break free from all shackles of casteism. Hindu religion accords food an important place as can be seen from various religious texts and rituals that revolve around food. The practice of growing as well as giving food was considered a great dharma. It was on these grounds that many festivals included worshipping the seed, the crop, the rain and celebrating the harvest were carried out.

Tritiya Upanishad states the role of food thus: "From food (anna), verily, creatures are produced/ Whatsoever dwell on earth.... For truly, food is the chief of beings..." (qtd in Hume 284). "Beings here are born from food, when born they live by food, on deceasing/ they enter into food" (290). "Food is alive, it is not just pieces of carbohydrate, protein and nutrient, it is a being/ it is a sacred being/ Verily, they obtain all food/ who worship Brahma as food" (280). The sacred and privileged position enjoyed by food as a nourishing element of living souls is thus underpinned

in various mythologies that cut across cultures and languages. The purity rituals surrounding food that includes maintaining sanctity of kitchen spaces and purity of the person who cooks the food is strictly practised in Hindu households in India.

It is important to look at the discrimination Dalits faced around food, and how they regard their food. Dalits went through extremely dehumanising situations at a point in history when their shadows and footprints were regarded an eyesore. India witnessed untouchability in its worst and most ugly forms when it was mandatory for Dalits to have brooms tied behind them, so that their footprints don't leave a mark on the ground and pollute it.

Shamsul Islam's *Untouchables in Manu's India* is a treatise on the rules prescribed in *Manusmriti*. The chapters give insight into how a demeaning status was forced upon the *Sudras* on various grounds. Along with the principles of living, character, personal habits and conduct of the Brahmins, special attention was also paid to the sphere of food. People were divided on the basis of occupational duties and rules on food prohibitions across castes.

“...food of an artisan destroys his (Brahmin's) offspring, that of a washer man his strength; the food of a multitude and of harlots exclude him from (the higher) worlds. A Brahmin... must not eat cooked food given by a *Sudra* who performs no *Sraddha*; but, on failure of (other) means of subsistence, he may accept raw (grain), sufficient for one night (and day) ...” (41). The distinction of raw and cooked food that Levi Strauss makes is applicable in this context. Rawer food contains less human intervention as opposed to the cooked food. Humans create certain criteria to decide on what is fit to be eaten. A set of social factors play a role in deciding the desirability of each of these food items. In the chapter “On food, death and pollution etc”, it is

mentioned that the food of the *Sudras* should be “the fragments of an Aryan’s meal” (43). It is interesting to look at these laws in the light of theories of purity and dirt.

Separate dwellings were forced upon the untouchables who had to follow strict prohibitions in terms of accessing pure water and food. Their deprived situation was maintained through rules that prevented intermingling of cultures or development in their lifestyle. While the laws inscribed in religious scriptures prevent improvements in the socio- economic conditions of the dalits, they continue to live a life steeped in helplessness, ignorance and poverty. Religious codes sanction the deteriorated status of the untouchables in the society. Lifestyle, living conditions, food choices and habits of the dalits thus came to be looked at as dirty, polluting and as inciting evil. With strict prescriptions on how to live their lives, what clothes to wear, what names to be adopted, what food to be eaten and how, dalits, more or less have no control over the lives they lead. The practice of untouchability that extends to limiting their food and water intakes proves the total subjugation meted out to dalits by ignoring their hunger and pushing them to live on meagre needs. Along with strict prohibitions on entering temple premises, untouchables were also denied the basic rights to access public well or tap. Many dalit narratives portray the tedium of dalits waiting in long queues to receive water at the mercy of some higher castes. In 1927, Ambedkar launched a *satyagraha* (a passive political resistance advocated by Mahatma Gandhi) to assert the rights of dalits to access public places and water resources. Ambedkar, along with his followers marched to the *Chavdar Tale* (tasty water lake) and proclaimed their right to access water by drinking from the tank. This event was followed by many protests by the caste Hindus who considered it as extremely defiling act. *Pujas* were ordered to be conducted so that the water would regain its lost purity. Such was the situation the untouchables confronted in the first

half of the twentieth century. It was only in 1937 that the Bombay High Court allowed untouchables the right to use water from the tank.

The idea of pollution and purity is so entrenched in the minds of the people that it is practiced even among the sub-castes that fall further down in the caste ladder. The practise of sharing of tobacco pipes in some Indian villages displays how purity consciousness works in the consumption of tobacco smoking. Men who share smoking pipes only with those belonging to the same caste reinforce caste hierarchy in a different form. Separate smoking pipes for different castes show how deeply-entrenched the notion of untouchability is among various castes. In some cases, a cloth is used to wipe the pipe prior to its usage. The ingrained belief of coming into contact with another person's saliva as an extremely polluting act is so strong in the Indian society. Some even consider one's own saliva to be a polluting agent and therefore refuse to touch the lips on the glass, while drinking water. Mary Douglas, British anthropologist writes in her ground-breaking work *Purity and Danger* about the idea of dirt as a 'matter out of place' (36). She illustrates through examples how the concept of dirt or pollution gets tied to ritualistic pollution. By touching upon the root cause for pollution, saliva is looked at as a defiling element. Saliva pollution which is brought about by material substances lead to the practice of drinking water without the lips touching the cup. Douglas also draws distinction between cooked and raw food by discussing how raw food passes the test of pollution, while the process of cooking defiles the food, making it liable to pollution (34). The act of cooking that involves the question of 'who' cooks the food and 'how' it is cooked leads to the notion of defilement. Food gets polarised in the caste conscious society, dividing people on all lines. When food is cooked, it enters a field of humiliation and brutality. The process of cooking embodies various cultural factors and takes into

account methods of procurement, cleaning, preservation techniques, preparation, use of vessels and the ingredients. In certain ritualistic functions of the lower castes, those from the upper castes who served as *purohits* (priest) could not accept cooked food and food transactions were limited to raw food stuffs. Cooking itself can be viewed as a product of the civilizational drive that contains within it constructed notions of culture.

It is also worth looking at how certain castes were interdependent on each other for their livelihood. For example, the *Kumhars*, the castes whose traditional occupation is pottery making, exchanged their pottery in return for essential items like grains. Festivals like Bullock or *Pola* festival, *Aktiare* conducted in Indian villages where nature is invoked for its blessings. It is during these festivals that the interdependence of peasants and *Kumhars* were celebrated through exchange of goods as gifts. With modernisation and capitalism which boosted growth of industries, pottery makers and farmers suffered a huge set back. Although in the present times, one finds an improvement of lifestyle among dalits due to the spread of education, communities like the *Kumhars* or the *Telis* (members whose occupational duty involves oil seed crushing) or *adivasis* (who were the providers of forest products like honey and the like), experience hardship with an absence of market space, taken over by the big corporates to sell their goods. Untouchability has been banned and reservations are made available, but discrimination and exclusion still persist in various forms. (Natrajan 33-35)

The Hindu system discovers in food a firm experiential ground on which to integrate the material with the moral, the sensorial with the intuitive, and to extend the subjective to the mystical.... In such a

perspective, food is much more for the Hindu than what food ordinarily is within the 'seen' world. (*Eternal Food* 47)

David Gordon White in his essay "You Are What You Eat: The Anomalous Status of Dog Cookers in Hindu Mythology" details the caste discrimination faced by the *Svapacas*, commonly known as 'dog cookers'. They lived a separate existence in the societal fringes and performed functions of scavenging and clearing of corpses and carcasses. Even though there is no evidence in *puranic* scriptures of them cooking dog meat, they are associated with the name because of their habitation which is a haunt of dogs. The lower position is assigned due to various factors that include them being viewed as a product of a dangerous mixing of castes known as the *varnasamkara*, their involvement with prohibited foods, and their exposure to polluting substances that result from their determined vocations. (53-60)

Belasco Warren, the British food scholar explains the dynamics of a meal. With literary analysts looking at food as a metaphor, symbol and agent by which people communicate, sociologists studying social stratification and construction through food, it is often not food that is the primary motive of inquiry, but a variety of other social factors that can be effectively studied through food ("Identity" 28). He asks questions about how a simple meal speaks one's personality, ethnicity, gender roles, sexuality, family vitality, sub cultural loyalties, and political commitments (30). He talks about the Victorian period when people constructed elaborate food etiquettes and dining rules. The reason for this is ascribed to the deep suspicion that the Victorians harboured towards eating, which like sex they considered uncivilized. The European settlers had apprehensions to taste food eaten by the locals for fear of being denigrated to their position. Here one finds the connection that food builds in making a person. Distancing oneself from the food of the other was essential to show their

superiority and the fear of stooping to a low social order prevented the upper classes from sharing local food choices and culture.

Mughals who came to India in the first half of the sixteenth century propagated their cuisine in the Northern regions of India through treatises on food. It is said that textualization of the culinary took shape with Mughals prescribing dietary patterns for Indians. The presence of Mughalai cuisine is the result of the Mughal rulers who attempted in many ways to impose the Mughal culture through their food. The hierarchy embedded in food finds expression in the way people use food in different social contexts. The European settlers in South Asian and American colonies refused to eat the food of the indigenous people for fear of being degenerated to a lower position. Food is inextricably linked to one's socio economic status and foraging into another's food territory offers an indirect way of participating legitimately in their culture. Food offers ways in which to experience another culture. It also acts as a social weapon to exclude people. The role of food is central when it comes to exclusion on the grounds of class, caste, religion and community. Food reinforces one's identity and binds one to its roots. This is the reason why food occupies a dominant position for the migrant and diasporic communities. The totality of sensations that food embodies makes it unique among other cultural artefacts. It therefore becomes an object strongly rooted in one's psychological and emotional state.

It is interesting to note how the history of a nation's cuisine is linked to the history of the nation itself. Deep meanings of culture are embedded in the layers of food which makes the study of food in exploring cultures rewarding. Historians have analysed many historical truths and evidences by placing food at the centre of academic enquiry. For example, the history of potato unravels information about the

growth of industrial revolution and sheds light on what one may dismiss off as a mere vegetable as something that changed the course of European history. Similarly, the study of the history of tobacco details the geographical exploration and travails of Columbus who brought it to the New World. While the cuisine of a particular State is determined by different factors ranging from the geographical terrains to aspects of culture that it associates with, globalisation has brought about the intermingling of varied cultures together. This results in a dilution of the traditional culinary practices. Still, specific food and dietary habits characterise the culinary domain of various ethnic groups in India. The practice of using indigenous techniques, ingredients and raw materials is a way of retaining and reinforcing an identity, considered marginal by the mainstream society. Roland Barthes in *Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* argues that an entire 'world' is signified by food. He links the preparation of food and cooking to a historical quality that allows the person to get linked to the national past. Barthes sees food as an entity that expresses a national continuity.

Even though much of geographical explorations revolved around some food or the other, there were many prejudices that surrounded the food of the colonised. For example, eating chillies were thought to be an uncivilized activity by the sophisticated Europeans. In this context, one finds how food was adopted to convey power and values. Certain food items represented certain qualities. In the European context, meat on the table meant luxury, while sugar symbolised happiness and prosperity. Taste, a culturally created entity formed over time has clear associations with caste and class values.

Discrimination operates on various levels and through many mediums. It is interesting to look at how food spaces function as an avenue to discriminate people.

'Culturalism' looks at spaces carrying loaded cultural significance as containing strains of micro dominance and micro resistance. Food spaces are a domain where power and authority find a platform to exercise its motives. When we look at the spatial isolation of culture, food spaces like tea shops or pubs assume wider significance. Food spaces exist as sites of oppression even today. Raymond Williams in his essay "Culture is Ordinary" shares an anecdote where he talks about the significance that a tea shop holds for a class of people. Williams discusses the culture of the ordinary as a culture that deserves its praises too (3-4). Here we find how Williams uses the image of the tea shop to drive an important point home. Tea shops, in this context are considered as spaces that acquire a cultural significance through its constant associations in building social bonds and nurturing academic vigour. Similarly, coffee shops are associated with European intellectualism. Restaurants, distinguished on regional and ethnic differences sometimes become spaces that delineate certain sects of people by creating a feeling of aloofness amongst them. Kitchens are regarded as sacred places ruled by religiously codified rules regarding purity and pollution. It is another important area within a household where power holds authority. As far as dalits are concerned, food spaces have always stood testifying their demeaning position.

India has witnessed some worst famines in the post- independent times. The large number of the population still lives on a meagre income that prevents them from accessing nutritional food. Mary Douglas, in her *Introduction to Food in the Social Order* argues that the horrors of famines could be reduced through an understanding of the social, legal and economic aspects of food problems. She explains how unequal access to food is the result of social inequalities. Even though government provides subsidised food grains for the poor, the labyrinth of caste prevents them from

accessing it (1-4). This way all efforts are being taken to prevent dalits from enjoying basic life necessities that allow them to live a comfortable life. In other words, the current system could be viewed as a continuation of the past situation that imposed food based restrictions on the untouchables. The intention behind all this is to ensure that dalits do not rise from their deprived status to be on par with the upper castes. Poverty and hunger remain a reality in Indian society with millions going hungry and cases of malnutrition and deprivation abounding. Food can give multiple perspectives on the living conditions of its consumers. The drought-hit *Bundelkhand* witnessed a large number of families going hungry. The lack of grains and other essentials forced the inhabitants to find alternatives in grass and weeds. The poverty stricken situation in *Bundelkhand* was captured through the image of food when *CNN IBN* did a documentary film on the same. Poverty and hunger found expression in a raw manner through the image of children nibbling on *roti* and *namak* or the '*ghaski roti*' and *subzi* made of weeds. The situation is termed as a man-made disaster by many who examine the corrupt practices in food distribution.

A dalit's memories related to food form the crux of dalit experience which hinges on torture, humiliation and embarrassment. It is important to look at the place of food in the formation of caste hierarchy, considering its role as an essential commodity for the existence of mankind. The life of people can be examined through an understanding of their culinary ways which include procurement of food, preparing them, preservation techniques, food storage, serving and eating. Dalit literature documents instances of cooking and eating with much reverence. Food is loaded with memory, happy and sad, painful and nostalgic. For dalits, whose idea of a meal is purely out of necessity, food becomes the sole priority in their day to day experience.

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Chapter 2

Deciphering Marginal Food Dialects: Dalit Food Narratives

The role of food was fore-grounded when national identity itself came to be defined on culinary terms. Post- independent India witnessed a profusion of cook books that helped build a sense of collective identity among people through food. Arjun Appadurai through his ground breaking work, “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India”, explicates the way in which cookbooks forge a sense of nationhood at a crucial period in history when fragmentation was giving way to a collective and unified representation. Identities are expressed and validated through food. For the ethnic minorities, migrant communities and the diaspora, food offers a significant means to articulate their identities. Studying marginal food cultures helps one grasp the social reality of that particular society.

One can always discern the ways in which the culinary sphere differs in terms of the privileged and the underprivileged, rich and the poor. While expensiveness, variety, choices, quality, quantity, table etiquettes, manners and presentation style are features defining food of the elites, food of the economically backward is marked by an absence of these characteristics. Mary Douglas, British social anthropologist examines the structures that characterise consumption practices of different classes of society in her work *Food in the Social Order*. She remarks that the food of the marginalised is largely unstructured, do not follow fixed consumption patterns and is largely devoid of dietary rules that govern the eating habits of the privileged class. While complexity drives the food choices of a rich household, it is mostly a monotonous diet that rules a poor household. Food thus comes to be seen more as a

necessary element that sustains the lives of dalits. Doughlas quotes a passage from Tony Morrison's *Song of Solomon* to explicate these facts:

No meal was ever planned or balanced or served. Nor was there any gathering at the table. Pilate might bake hot bread and each of them would eat it with butter whenever she felt like it. Or there might be grapes, leftover from the wine making, or peaches for days on end. If one of them bought a gallon of milk, they drank it until it was gone. If another got a half bushel of tomatoes or a dozen ears of corn, they ate them until they were gone too. They ate what they came across or had a craving for.... (qtd in *Doughlas*16)

The passage explicates some crucial features of marginal food habits. For those living in poor circumstances, fixed time patterns for food and meal planning do not necessarily exist. Their eating habits and food choices depend largely on availability and accessibility. Doughlas observes that "the food carried no symbolism at all except its power to satisfy private and spontaneous whim" (16). "...one could say that so long as it remained unstructured it could not carry meanings. The food was part of a chosen lifestyle" (20). She also talks about the meaning that the concept of feast acquires when placed in different cultural contexts. Based on the premise that food is used to give meanings to an occasion, food is considered an expression of one's lifestyle. Feasts that involve all the members of the community bind people and establish friendly relationships with them. (14-20)

Food embodies a complex set of principles that rule one's life. Apart from its ability to fuse one's emotions and build a collective identity framework, food stands witness to the daily occurrences in a person's life. Elaborate descriptions of food,

food recipes, preparation of dishes and food cravings find a dominant place in novels, short stories, memoirs and poems of marginal or subaltern literature. Food images and food centric situations are frequently explored in dalit narratives as it is loaded with the concerns of poverty, hunger and deep longing for food. For ethnic communities or those with distinct hereditary traditions, cuisine becomes an important mechanism through which culture gets represented and validated. An exploration of dalit food through life narratives and stories shows how life experiences of dalits are deeply intertwined with food.

Sharmila Rege, feminist scholar and sociologist, examined caste and gender through the perspective of food in the work *Isn't this Plate Indian? Dalit Histories and Memories of Food*. Rege, who took notice of the importance that food holds in a dalit's life through dalit narratives, embarked on a journey to gather information regarding dalit food. Encountering a total absence of dalit food in cookery books, Rege along with her students began exploring dalit food by recording food memories and recipes from dalit households.

The book looks at the concept of dalit food closely and addresses the concern that knowledge on dalit food is largely inaccessible. She also makes observations on hunger, which she argues is never a neutral phenomenon. While for the privileged, hunger represents an abstinence from food through which they gain spiritual solace; hunger becomes an obligation that dalits are obliged to suffer from. The text also locates the issue of power relations around gender that is embedded in food. Through an analysis done through interviewing members of dalit community, unknown facts of dalit lifestyle choices and food habits were observed, which form the crux of *Isn't this Plate Indian?*. The book sheds light on the misconceived notions around dalit food culture. The work reminds the reader that ideas of dalit food as unhygienic, lacking

nutrition, taste and variety cannot be generalised. By juxtaposing some indigenous recipes of dalits, the work enriches one's understanding of dalit cuisine and reconstructs the notion of hygiene and nutrition from a cultural perspective. Dalit food, Rege notes, is considered as a site of oppression through which they are delineated to a lower position. At the same time, Rege proves that food is indeed a rich material of knowledge and argues for the need to document knowledge on marginal communities through food.

Dalit life narratives are a testimony to the poverty, hunger and longings of its subjects. Food is represented in its different hues that the evocative power of food seeps through the narrative, leaving an indelible mark on the readers. Therefore a look at dalit stories that are strewn with food memories and food centric incidents will enlighten one on the important position of food in a dalit's life. Dalit narratives position food as a site of cruel discrimination and record the humiliation and sufferings that the fight for food brings about. Memories that revolve around food remain strong. This is the reason why situations located in the past are recreated through food.

Just as food gives a perspective into the socio-religious and economic structure of its consumers, actions revolving around food are powerful reminders of entitlement, power and position in the social order. In her autobiographical novel *Karukku*, Bama's first realisation of caste based discrimination and idea of untouchability strikes her when she notices the manner in which an upper class person is served a packet of vadais by a dalit. *Karukku* gives glimpses into the nature and practice of untouchability through an incident that revolves around a packet of hot, fried vadais:

....he came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood there thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won't the package come undone, and the vadai fall out? The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais. (13)

This instance from Bama's childhood is a pointer to the discrimination carried around food transactions. In the quoted passage, servitude, inferiority and fear of the dalit are contrasted against dominance and greed of the upper caste man. The incident revolving around the food transaction between a lower and an upper caste man in *Karukku* signals the humiliation that dalits are subjected to.

It is interesting to look at the ways in which food transactions are played out in different contexts. While food transactions at home may see a dominance and submissiveness in terms of gender relations, food transactions carried out in the religious context position food on a divine and spiritual plane, thus placing food itself on a dominant position. Arjun Appadurai coins the term 'gastro-politics' (*Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia* 495) to describe the complexities that arise due to 'social transactions around food'. He presents his observations of food by looking at the domain of household, temples and festivals and explains how the process of food transactions occurs in different cultural contexts. The mechanism of gender politics and hierarchy expressed through food are also looked into. (Jopi, Nyma and Pere Gallardo 34)

In his much appreciated work on cookbooks, Appadurai talks about the prominent position that food enjoys in the Hindu thought. Food is looked at as a trope

around which much of moral and social action take place. Food taboos and prescriptions divide as well as bring people together. The link between men and women, man and God, upper and lower castes are controlled to a great extent by food. He considers eating together to be a ‘carefully conducted exercise in the reproduction of intimacy’ (*How to Make a National Cuisine* 10). He also comments on how exclusion of people from social events that involve sharing of food is a ‘symbolically intense social signal of rank, of distance, or of enmity’. (10)

Limbale’s autobiography *Akkarmashi*, translated into English as *The Outcaste* chronicles Limbale’s experiences of being born a half caste in a *Mahar* community. The account begins with the description of a school picnic. Food becomes a central trope in the narrative that speaks of untouchability as it is experienced by children in its most explicit forms. Students who belonged to the *Mahar* castes were not allowed in joining the activities that the upper castes involved themselves in. They were made to sit and eat separately, away from the sight of their classmates and teachers. The realisation of an inferior status that runs deep in the dalit children could be seen in the way they regard their food:

Parshya didn’t even have a piece of cloth to tie up his food in, so his bhakarīs [unleavened bread made of millet] were tied with mine. Mallya had brought bombil fish. Umbryia had brought only bhakari and no chutney. We opened our bundles. The high caste children offered their food to our teachers. Theirs was a variety of fried and tasty food.

Mallya offered us his bombil curry and, in exchange, we offered him our dry bhakari as he had not brought any. Dare I offer my chutney-

bhakari to my teacher? Would he eat it? Bhakaris of the high caste were of course of a better quality. Their mothers had given them fried food, whereas we had just pieces of dry bhakaris which were hardly enough to satisfy the ache of hunger. (*Outcaste 2*)

A direct comparison is made of the two kinds of food brought by the students. The dry *bhakaris* and the fried food stuffs give an insight into the social background of the two classes of students. Sharing of food among *Mahars* shows the interdependency of the caste for survival. Food sharing among dalits was considered more of a necessity than as a symbol of exchange of happiness. Sharing of food among them is a way of compensating for the lack of food. Sharing is done on a mutual platform as can be seen from the passage cited above where *bhakaris* are given in exchange for fish curry.

The concept of food sharing takes on a different course when placed in the context of the higher castes. Variety, along with excessive quantities of food rule food choices of this group. Limbale also presents an instance where the food is shared between the two castes, strictly following the rules of casteism:

...The high caste girls from our village offered us their curry and bhakaris without touching us. The teacher asked the high-caste boys and girls to collect the left-overs on a piece of paper and give it to us...it contains crumbs of different kinds of food and their spicy smell filled the air. We squatted in a circle and stuffed ourselves greedily. We had never tasted food like that before. We were all really gluttonous. Our stomachs were as greedy as a beggar's sack.

When I got home I told my mother all this. Like the victim of a famine she said, ‘Why didn’t you get at least a small portion of it for me? Left-over food is nectar.’ (*Outcaste* 3)

The above passage explains the place of left-over food in a dalit’s life. Even though discrimination plays out in the form of serving crumbs of food to the dalits, left-over food entices them so much that they think of it only in terms of satisfying their hunger and food cravings. The comparison of the left-over food to ‘nectar’ shows the reverence attached to it and the importance it holds in a dalit’s life. Being served crumbs is in itself seen as a privilege to a class of people who have not known a life otherwise. Begging for scraps of food is a recurrent situation in many dalit stories.

Appadurai argues that leftovers are treated as an extremely sensitive category in traditional Hindu thought. Appadurai draws ideas from Khare and Marriot to talk about the concept of leftovers. Eating of leftovers, argues Appadurai, ‘carries the risk of moral degradation, biological contamination and loss of status’ (*How to Make a National Cuisine* 8). It is important to note the set of significations contained within leftovers. While those belonging to the higher social order consider serving of left-over as an activity through which they gain some spiritual merits, it becomes an obligation on the part of the dalits to partake the leftover food with gratitude. The dalits are conditioned to believe that their entitlements are restricted to leftovers and are unaware of the issues of pollution, contamination and deterioration of status that are rooted in the act of receiving leftovers. Therefore, serving and partaking of leftovers perform a social function of maintaining and perpetuating division of society. In Om Prakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, one finds food taking on the prime position of victimhood that is festered upon the dalits.

Food of the dalits being the site of humiliation stems from the long history of the associations their food has with the concept of *joothan* or *bhakri* or the leftovers. R. S Khare describes leftovers as “uneaten food” (*Eternal Food* 226). The associations of leftovers with pollution are explained by the fact that leftovers or garbage is gorged upon by pigs, dogs etc which are considered ‘dirty’ by the society. So, when the untouchables were fed with leftovers, they were seen on the same level as that of the animals. There were specific rules prescribed regarding the use of leftovers. One could receive the leftover of only one’s superior. For example a Brahmin could partake the leftover of God, in which case the left over will assume the status of a divine *prasad*, an auspicious food. Those below the caste hierarchy had to receive *joothan* from those immediately above their caste position. These laws prevented the caste groups from engaging in socially friendly situations and cemented the hierarchy between different castes.

The image of the leftover food or *Joothan* reinforces poverty, dirt and impurity. Khare argues in his *Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists* that the essence of *anna* (food), according to the Hindu philosophy rests on *annadana* (giving of food). This way, the giver of food earns religious merit and the receiver accumulates a debt (208). He also points out how the Hindu tradition regards food as Brahman and all beings as various forms of food. This is the reason why food is to be first served to gods in many Hindu households. He also talks about the notion of leftover food as “uneaten food”. By giving or receiving the leftover food, one is being placed on the rungs of caste hierarchy. The readers are given an overview of food triangle whose three corners are occupied by food, left over and faeces or *amedhya*. The three orders of meaning that regulate food, according to Khare, are utilitarian, symbolic and the expressive. He explains the utilitarian aspect of food as

something that could be eaten and the symbolic function of food as something that incites meaning to food and its consumer in a social context. The example of *Sabari*, the wild woman devotee in Ramayana who served fruits to Rama after tasting it herself is adopted by Khare to demonstrate the expressive role of food. In the context of the expressive characteristics of food, the act of *Sabari* can be read as giving god the left-over food instead of receiving it from him, thus reversing the hierarchy of the god and devotee. (223-34)

Dalits, whose food is strongly tinged with memories of pain, fight daily battles of humiliation to meet their hunger. When their caste duties push them into handling the waste that society flushes out, dalits become entitled to carry out the most dehumanising and self-depreciating tasks. “Hunger” is one of Dhasal’s poems that speaks of the haunting issue of hunger among dalits:

Hunger

There’s not a single grain in our house today

Not a single clever brain in our house today

Hunger

If one sings till the last light of the innermost being

will it turn off hunger-light?

Hunger if one takes care of you now

will it darken?

Hunger, your style is your own

No other calamity comes our way

but you. (52)

Dhasal's poem reminds the readers what it is like to live without food. The impact it has on their lives is unexplainable. Hunger takes a toll on their health and overall well-being. It is the only disaster that comes their way. Dhasal further writes:

Hunger you make things too difficult

Hunger just tell us what breed this monkey is

And if you can't

Then we will screw

Seventeen generations of you

Hunger, you and your mother. (53)

In these lines we find a correlation between illiteracy and hunger. For generations, dalits were forbidden from receiving knowledge, a domain confined to the interests of the Brahmins. It is through the weapon of knowledge that the priestly class wielded power in the society by controlling codes of conduct through religious scriptures. With the passage of time, educational policies have been extended to the dalits. Still, we find an increase in the drop out cases. This partly stems from the malnourishment and drowsiness that come from lack of consuming food. Hunger overpowers the lives of a large population of dalits, thereby pushing education, health, religion or morality to the background. By tackling hunger, one could solve a range of issues that are inextricably tied to one other. The speaker is found to be cursing abuses at the personified image of hunger, towards the end of the poem. By doing so, the explicit

anger dunked deep down within the speaker and tolerated over generations is poured out.

When a diet is followed over a considerable period of time, it becomes part of a lifestyle. In the case of dalits, the choice over what to eat or how to eat was almost non-existent. They rarely thought of food beyond its life sustaining property. Their taste was ruled by what was prescribed to them by the Brahminical order. It is interesting to examine how these significations work in the lives of dalits. Due to prohibition on certain food stuffs and lack of affordability, some foods are completely absent in the dalit diet. It is important to re-examine the constructs of nutrition, dirt, happiness from the perspective of what Barthes terms 'the veritable grammar of food'- a set of significations buried in food for the purpose of defining and communicating certain values and ideas.

Barthes talks about the primary role of food in the context of social behaviour when he asserts that a 'grammar of food' is needed to understand and reflect the complexities of all social interactions and actions. In "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption", Barthes writes:

To eat is a behaviour that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signalling other behaviours...What are these other behaviours? Today we might say all of them: activity, works, sports, effort, leisure, celebration- every one of these situations is expressed through food. We might almost say that this 'polysemia' of food characterizes modernity. (25)

Barthes argues that food is not just a requirement to meet nutritional needs but is “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour.” (21)

The tastes of the dalits are formed by societal forces over the years. Pierre Bourdieu underlines the importance of food concerning matters of taste that contribute to building class distinctions. Stretching the importance of food thus, Bourdieu marks the category of food as that which is a defining factor of one’s social status. People distinguish among themselves on the basis of distinctions of taste. Tastes assign various degrees of privilege and dominance to those who ascribe to it. The distinction of taste categorises situations and objects into good or bad and cultured or uncultured, thus defining the patterns of consumption across various classes in the society. Bourdieu’s theory of consumer taste formation ascribes the position of taste as socially conditioned. He also defines the role of objects of consumer choice as that which reflects a ‘symbolic hierarchy’ that is ‘maintained by the socially dominant class in order to enforce their distance or distinction from other classes of society. (1-5)

Food occupies a significant position when placed in the context of food sharing among dalits, especially during celebrations that centre around feasts. Identities are reinforced and expressed when food brings all the members together and they partake in the cooking and eating process as a community. *The Grip of Change* by Sivakami, is dotted with instances set against the backdrop of food. The following passage offers a glimpse into the activities that unfold during a celebratory occasion:

Raw and boiled paddy were hulled separately, the first to make sweet flour, the second for food. If they did not even get one rice meal in the

three days of the festival, wouldn't the guests spit on their faces! Only a few households had the special mountain millet, thenai. That golden grain would be soaked and pounded along with jaggery and mixed with carefully collected honey. The god Murugan's favourite food! But how many could collect such a rare variety? (*The Grip of Change* 83)

The value and reverence attached to food being cooked is explicated through the description of the grain as 'golden' and the honey as 'carefully collected'. The place of god *Murugan* in the lives of this community of dalits is emphasized with the help of a special food preparation that is regarded as *Murugan's* favourite food. Sidney Mintz, one of the earlier writers on food associates food habits with deep emotions. He brings in the example of African slaves in the Caribbean for whom cooking is a means of creative expression. For this community, creation of a cuisine carves a unique cultural identity of their own. They see cooking as helping them reconstruct and participate in their cherished cultural experience.

"Rice was boiling in one earthen pot. Meat smeared with turmeric and salt was simmering in another. The rich aroma attracted the children playing nearby. Saroja's mother kept an eye on the meat and rice while grinding the batter for the vadai" (*The Grip of Change* 83). Meat had a special place in their lives because of the rarity and richness that the dish is associated with. There is hardly any dalit writing without reminiscing the meat. The deep food longings of the dalits are often expressed through the tempting flavours of meat dishes. Tasty food, for the dalits is a rarity to be enjoyed only on special occasions. This is the reason why dalits look forward to such occasions with great hope of satisfying their food craving, which otherwise has no place in their lives.

Holtzman in his essay “Food and Memory” talks about the inextricable link that food forges with memory. Food is a multilayered and multidimensional subject used to validate ethnic identity. Holtzman analyses various factors that lead to food becoming a potent site for the construction of memory (362-65). ‘The sensuality of eating transmits powerful mnemonic cues, principally through smells and tastes’ (373), Holtzman proposes. With regard to dalit identity, food occupies a relevant position because it is on the site of food that the dalits had to wage much of the battles against untouchability. Even though there is a growing consciousness to include dalits in the public sphere and integrate them in social activities, discrimination runs deep. As far as food is concerned, each meal that they partake of a repository of food memories that often hinges on harsh realities. Arjun Appadurai, in his *Gastro-politics in Hindu South East Asia* talks about the function of food to bear the ‘load of everyday social discourse’ (494). Unlike houses, clothing, food is a constant need and is perishable. There is a daily pressure to acquire and produce food. This aspect of food is extremely relevant in the case of dalits since food is the sole concern in their lives. The scientific tradition that sets poverty lines focus on essential factors like food and the poorest of the poor are found to spend more than half of their budget on food. It is on the texture of food that their day to day experiences are etched. Food is the product of the dalit’s labour and reflects the burden of their toil. Therefore studying dalit food culture is a rewarding way to get acquainted with dalit memories and struggles around food acquisition.

In Sharankumar Limbale’s autobiographical short story, “The Bastard”, he remembers how the girl, whom he liked, lived her life:

“When her mother went away to work, Shevanta did the baby-sitting. Her little brother was always tucked under her arm and her two little sisters tagged along with

her, bawling all the time. Her parents left two *bhakris* for them for the whole day. But then, all the Mahars survived on as much, making do for the rest with large gulps of water.” (*Poisoned Bread*130)

Through this incident, Limbale offers a mirror to the daily life of *Mahars*. Being forced to live a life on a meagre subsistence, one finds how scraps of food become a part of their existence. Over generations, dalits get used to hunger and stop having thoughts about food. In families with large number of members, the little food that is cooked has to feed many mouths. Shevanta, her brother and her two sisters had to feed themselves on two pieces of *bhakris* for the whole day. This explains poverty in all its terms. Another issue that grips most dalits is the brawls that they engage in. The money earned is laundered by buying alcohol and this is a dangerous trend that still continues in many communities. They see their indulgence in alcoholism as a much needed respite in their monotonous life punctuated by hunger. They mostly live without any hopes for the future and therefore do not believe in the idea of saving money. *The Poisoned Bread* throws light on the Mahars community’s weakness for alcohol and the brawls that it gives way to: “Dada used to drink and brawl and get beaten up. He squandered the money he earned, tore up the money and abused the *sarpanch*.” (136)

Sometimes, women too get involved in drinking: “Once Dada was drunk, he couldn’t resist a quarrel with Santamai. She too drank and reined blows on him. Dada would hurl away his meal-plate, scattering the mess all over the house. That day our dog Champi would have its fill” (137). Studies have proven the correlation between poverty, unemployment and alcohol consumption.(Khan, Murray and Barnes, 2002)

In another excerpt from “This Too shall Pass” by P. E Sonkamble, we find:

At times I would get a small quantity of bread with plenty of ambadyachi bhaji. Would often have to fill our stomachs with these herbs dried and stored during the harvest. Or else, we would eat other vegetables with no proper seasonings....But then they began to make me eat close to the piles of dried dung cakes, or near where small children sat to relieve themselves. I was revolted, and thought it a hardship to work against my will, but nevertheless ate. I felt like running away.

....Then I'd be sulking to someone's farm to do odd jobs and eat whatever stale food they offered me. Sometimes, if nothing else was available, they would say, 'Eat, boy, bake these ears of grain and eat them'. At times I would eat and at times, I would simply stay without food. For often these people were just putting me to the test, and would say, 'What! We've hardly said the word "eat" and you're gobbling already. Hasn't your school taught you any manners? When will you get some sense?' So I would eat only if they insisted. I would wash the meal down with plenty of water. The baked grain would then swell up and make uncanny noises in my stomach, which would start to ache. And I would curse myself for having eaten the stuff. (162)

The above passage shows how social structures regulate consumption practices. The circumstances that background the partaking of food are dreadful. It is not just the humiliation they have to face at the cost of begging food, but also what they are left to eat and under what circumstances. When they are forced to eat in close proximity to dirt, their status of being 'dirty' or 'impure', is being reinstated. While the act of eating is considered sacred by the caste Hindus, it is important to note how sanctity

was sucked away from the lives of dalits by not permitting them to enjoy a frugal meal in a clean surrounding. The discourse that surrounds eating, food, untouchability and pollution therefore calls for academic interest to look into ways to prevent discrimination surrounding food of the dalits in various forms.

McKim Marriot analyses caste hierarchy through food transactions by studying an Indian village. Through a detailed examination of social interactions among various castes in Kishan Garhi village in Uttar Pradesh, Marriot explicates how rankings work on food transactions, its reasons as well as consequences. He talks about the importance given to food in classical and contemporary Hindu thought. He notes how the properties associated with the raw, *pakka* and *kacca* food separate people in the caste hierarchy. Raw or *sidha* food that includes ghee, sugar or whole fruit was considered auspicious and the purest or the best state of food to be given as gifts to the Brahmins. He distinguishes *Pakka* as the superior category of cooked food that is fit to be offered to the gods and those of the higher castes. *Kacca* food, on the other hand is identified as inferior cooked food devoid of ghee or other highly valued contents, partaken by those from the lower castes and considered polluted.

Marriot also places the topic of leftovers or garbage in this food domain and explains how it becomes integrated with the lives of the lower castes. A low status is typified by low nutritional value and less monetary worth. He illustrates by giving examples of how the acceptance of an 'inferior' food bestows one with dishonour, helplessness and dependence on others for existence. (139- 59)

It is important to look at the impact that caste occupations have on the food of dalits. While occupation duties that centre around clearing off dead cattle may influence their food choices and preferences, it is crucial to examine the consequences

that demeaning tasks like scavenging have on a dalit's relationship with food. Luxury or pleasure associated with food is sometimes totally absent in their food experiences. Food and eating become a part of a work for them for the sake of survival. Du Saraswati, Kannada poet and theatre person in her short story "Tip" explores this aspect of food in graphic details. The story depicts the love that a daughter expresses for her mother through the act of cooking meat. Later on in the story, the reader is taken through the emotional journey of the mother, whose caste occupational duty of clearing carcasses interferes in the eating experience.

She bought half a kilo of goat's meat... picked up some ginger and coriander..., and bits of coconut and some gram dal..., cut the meat into small pieces and washed it with water into which she had mixed a little turmeric powder. She lit the kerosene stove and heated groundnut oil in a vessel. Then she added some sliced onion and the pounded garlic and ginger paste to the hot oil and stirred it as it sizzled. Mixing the meat into this, she added the coriander and chilli powders and covered the pan with a plate. As the meat cooked, she washed the grinding stone clean and ground a mixture of coconut, gram, coriander, bay leaves, garlic and ginger into a fine paste. ' This masala will make the meat really tasty; at least today Amma must eat her fill; she has not so much touched the ragi mudde for three days'. (336)

The character of food is presented in the most powerful way as she describes the preparation of the meat dish in detail. The careful attention paid to mix all the ingredients points to the importance the whole process of cooking is attached with. Since occasions of procuring meat are rare, the preparation is dealt with utmost care.

The daughter who is indulged in cooking constantly thinks of her mother for whom she cooks the delicious meal.

She served out the meat gravy and ragi balls on three plates and took her mother by the hand and seated her before a plate... 'Didn't your nose pick up the flavour?'

Filled with the stink of the dead dog, Anjinamma's nose could not feel the delicious aroma of the food...

As her fingers touched the ragi balls she felt its texture; it was like decomposed puppy that she had handled earlier in the day. Tears welled up in her eyes. They were real tears of grief this time. (*Steel Nibs are Sprouting*342)

Food items like ragi are a staple food in the dalit household. And it is through this particular food that the mother is transported to a world where horrific thoughts run deep. The texture of the ragi balls appears graphic as it is being compared to the decomposed flesh of the dog. The significations it invokes bring tears of grief to the mother who could not enjoy the meal. In the excerpt cited above, the author uses the medium of food to portray the painful emotions of the mother. The most essential fact of hunger vanishes as a consequence of the demeaning task that inscribes wretched memories and thoughts in the mother. The tears of the mother signify the agony of the untouchables in India who are entrusted with scavenging and disposing of animal carcasses. The passage informs one of the terrible consequences that demeaning caste occupations can have on quotidian activities of a dalit's life.

Dalits face humiliation not only for the food they consume, but also on their feelings around food. Their appetite and hunger get mocked at by those who have never known what hunger is. In her autobiographical account *Aidan*, translated as *The Weave of my Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, Urmila Pawar details the manifold ways in which casteism weighs down on the everyday lives of dalits. She mentions an incident from her schooldays when she was humiliated for her hunger and poor background during a celebration centred on cooking, food and eating. "They did not allow me to touch anything. However, we all ate together. I really enjoyed the meal. The next day, I was horrified to hear that my eating had become the hottest topic for juicy gossip. Girls were whispering in groups about 'how much I ate.'" (110)

The above passage throws light on the humiliation dalits face for their appetite and eating habits. They are looked down upon for their hunger and the quantity of food consumed. Cuisines categorised as high and low mark their differences through quality and quantity. In the essay "Tell me how much you eat and I'll show you who you are", Montanari quotes Jacques Le Goff, French historian and medievalist of international renown, who argues that food was the first opportunity for the ruling strata of society to show off their superiority" (115). The essay gives insights into how food was looked upon by those in the Middle Ages as an opportunity to mark social prestige and class differentiation. In other words, food was employed to demarcate certain people from the social circle. Montanari notes the significations that food appropriates in the court dining halls where huge quantities and variation of food portions symbolise authority and rank. He also traces how the significations relating to food change with the passage of time. While the idea of abundance signalled wealth in the medieval times, moderation and control over food and choices over what to eat have become the determinants of a wealthy lifestyle in the modern times. The

fear of hunger is something that most traditional societies are characterised by. Montanari sees fear of hunger as “a culturally shared reality, a collective preoccupation reflected in actions, choices, and behaviour”. (115-118)

Even after the abolishment of untouchability in 1948, dalits have not escaped the position of victimhood. Food continues to divide people on the lines of caste, class, religion and ethnicity. Overriding poverty coupled with the consciousness of depravity is rolled into the food of dalits, making it a substance embodying dalit angst and suffering.

It is in this context that one needs to look at the longings and temptation for food as it exists for dalits. N. K Hanumanthaiah, the Kannada poet in his “Wedding Lamps on Holey Street” writes:

There was no household in our hamlet that could afford three meals a day. With all the drinking, our household too was only getting by in poverty amid the fights. If we cooked some roti and muddle(millet dumping) in the morning, we would light the stove again only at night. Only two meals. Rice was rare. They brought home half a kilo rice only for some festivals. We yearned for rice. I never got to eat rice everyday till I was grown up. Ragi was our food. (387)

In the Hindu meal cycle, sugar enjoys a superior position compared to other tastes (*The Eternal Food* 223). It is interesting to look at the context in which sugar acquired a position of authority. Food like milk, butter or ghee was considered the purest among other food stuffs and had close associations with the superior force. The high value placed on certain food elevated them to a position that only a specific group had access to. The symbolic representations that divided food in terms of high and low,

served the purpose of strengthening the borders of the higher and the lower castes. Thus while ghee or milk became the food of the rich, gruel came to be look at as the symbol of poverty. An examination of dalit narratives would reveal how symbolisms play around food and how metaphors of food are used as forms of expression. Most narratives shed light on dalits' craving for spicy, hot food. The formation of such a spicy taste palate could be the result of social construction and distinction of tastes.

It could be noted that inferiority in terms of social position has been thoroughly ingrained among dalits that their happiness and contentment are constrained by the rigid laws of caste system. By being satisfied with whatever little they are being provided with, dalits reinstate their victimhood and dependable existence. Most often, they bear the torture of humiliation in order to satisfy their hunger.

Studying food parallel to language entails many observations. Just as language holds a mirror to one's cultural background, food system speaks the culture of its practitioner. Food is the repository of a collective identity. As a cultural artefact that signifies innumerable facts about the community to which it belongs, and as containing arbitrary meanings and fluctuating cultural dogmas or taboos, food can be considered a language in itself. Massimo Montanari looks at the fields of food and language as semiological systems. Both food and language are seen as 'codes of communication', reflecting and signifying economic, aesthetic, political, religious and ethnic meanings. Montanari assigns food a dialect and goes on to argue about the grammar that food displays. He regards food systems as 'a structure, inside of which each compartment defines its meaning'. ("Tell Me How Much You Eat" 99)

The idea of looking at food as a structure was dealt extensively by the structural anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss, whose exploration of cooking and food unveils the hidden structures of the society. The third volume in his wide ranging work *Mythologies* titled *The Origin of Table Manners* illustrates the fluidity of the three terms namely, the raw, cooked and the rotten. Strauss considers cooked food that requires the presence of heat and tools as a product of cultural transformation, whereas rotten food is observed to be a natural product of time. The three categories namely the raw, cooked and rotten are placed at three points of the culinary triangle to mark the degree of separation as well as the different stages between them. Strauss's distinction of the raw and the cooked with regard to the nature-culture dichotomy has influenced many scholars. (Davis)

Dalit narratives show how food exerts its presence in a dalit's life. They poignantly paint lives bordering on hunger and humiliation through food representations. Most dalit narratives demonstrate how access to food and water was a huge challenge for dalits. Stories interlaced with food therefore form a rich and powerful testimony to the brutality of dalit existence that is grounded on different dimensions of food. It is these narratives that open up a world of dalit cuisine and speak of a dalit's food aspirations.

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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, Adiyans, 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 biodiversity, 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. Douglas 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 Holeya 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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Conclusion

Bourdieu writes, “One cannot fully understand cultural practices unless ‘culture’, in the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage, is brought back into ‘culture’ in the anthropological sense, and the elaborated taste for the most refined objects is reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavours of food”. (*Distinction* 1)

As a microcosm of culture, food speaks volumes about various systems that mingle and coexist within culture. As many food historians and scholars argue, food offers a rich avenue to study human life in its entirety. While food provides a passage to understand various social changes and conflicts, the property of food to tackle issues and bring about social changes proves that food isn't something to be dismissed of as a mundane element of culture. Rather, it engulfs within its structure, meanings, stories and realities of the world. The story of a food item is often the story of slavery, colonialism and civilization. European trade across the world revolved around food like potato, corn, tomatoes, chocolate etc. These are the foods that revolutionized the diet, economy, social structure and politics the world over. Therefore studying events and social phenomena through food opens up many facets that otherwise go unnoticed.

Food represents the aspirations, dreams and desires of its consumers, while at the same time foregrounding identity, power relations, gender and class affiliations. Because of this reason, food as a subject has attracted the attention of literary and cultural scholars who examine food as a site on which meanings are constructed. Food, an explicit marker of one's taste, is looked at as a signifier that reflects one's class, social status and power. In Bourdieu's examination of taste as a social weapon,

food performs the primary function of segregating society through creation of class hierarchies and boundaries.

Coming to the ethnic communities that fall outside the caste divisions and form the fringes of the society, food habits and food related rituals mirror deep social structures that make up their culture. The lack of a fixed meal pattern, the aversion towards inaccessible food, rich knowledge about the indigenous plants and herbs are the features that distinguish the food domain of dalit groups like the tribals. Community bonding brought about through food sharing holds special significance for socially weak communities since it is through these occasions that they celebrate their identity and share their common food longings.

One cannot clearly demarcate cuisine on national or ethnic terms since no food culture embodies a unified cultural experience. But the existence of a marginal food culture that reflects the poor socio- economic stature of people cannot be denied. Efforts to create borders on the food realm have been an ongoing process. Kancha Ilaiah writes in his *Post Hindu India* that “Caste is a colossal compartmentalizer of food culture” (8). He gives a detailed analysis of tribal food culture and explains that the indigenous knowledge trapped in them makes their food unique and varied. Food choices of the tribals are looked down upon by others as uncivilized and barbaric. He goes on to talk about the tastes that determine the backwardness of communities like the tribals. The notion of civilization is a fluctuating concept that changes across communities and nations. Food cultures are determined on the basis of caste groups in India, opines Ilaiah. He also dwells on the concept of vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism. While a vegetarian diet is regarded as pure, the non vegetarianism diet is considered impure or uncivilized. Carrying the argument of vegetarian- non vegetarian diets as pure -impure forward, Ilaiah argues that when a dalit adopts a

vegetarian diet, it is considered as a process of *sanskritisation*, at the same time when a non-dalit indulges in a non-vegetarian diet, it is not seen as uncivilized or impure.

(5-8)

It is important to reconsider the binaries that food creates in order to comprehend how social injustices are brought into being and are maintained through time. Food exerts its presence in multiple, yet subtle ways on the society. The root cause of most inequalities that stem from casteism could be traced back to rules dictating food choices. Disparities would fade and boundaries would dissolve once the deep seated prejudices revolving around food are set aside. One needs to look at food within the larger context of structures in which it is placed. An understanding of food helps one rethink not only on notions of impurity, dirt and discrimination, but also ideas of health and nutrition as cultural constructed notions.

Myths surrounding the food of the dalits are influential in structuring prejudices. Food, which is intrinsically tied to the occupational duty of the dalits, mirrors their everyday aspirations. Whether it is the *Madigas* who peeled the skin of dead cattle to convert it into leather, the *Malas* who guarded the village from external threats, the *Kumhars* who made pots and sculptures, the *Gallas* who reared the cattle or the *Chakalis* who washed clothes, dalits were dehumanised for their occupational roles from which they had no escape. The mode of spirituality and other aspects of culture like art forms and food were in conjunction with their caste occupations. It is important to understand how certain food comes to be identified with and is invested with notions of dirt and impurity if untouchability is to be rooted out. Different dimensions of food come into play through observations of dalit eating habits and food. Illiteracy, unemployment, malnutrition, staggeringly low mortality rates and the continuance of poverty are closely linked to food. For the Dalits whose history

witnessed excessive brutality on the site of food, food rarely occupies a position that they are proud of. Their hesitance towards sharing their cooking experiences or food preferences or tastes stem from the generations of long battle against the exploitative oppression they have been facing at the expense of food.

Anthropological studies have proved that social intervention through food is an effective way to combat critical social issues. Therefore studying food of a socially and economically weak community not only unveils the social relations that hold them, but also helps one understand the ways through which depravity could be curtailed. When the food of the dalits is dismissed off as unclean, unhygienic and nutrition-less, it is important to place food in the dalit cultural context and examine their food choices, likes and dislikes, and attitude towards food.

While food predominates among other cultural entities in shaping identities, food of the marginalised marked by difference in food choices, cooking methods and consumption patterns give them a distinct status that is mostly derided in the society. When the discourse on whether a separate dalit aesthetic is required continues, it is necessary to look at dalit cuisine and its representation along with how it is perceived and received by the common people. Gayathri Spivak's dictum of 'whether the subaltern can speak' finds resonance here. In an environment of abject poverty and unemployment, food is the sole object of a dalit's existence. The search for food to quell the hunger of the family goes on. Food defines their purpose of life and continues to be a site of deep humiliation and embarrassment. With limited quantities, lack of any fruits or vegetables and the large membership among families, food rarely occupies the position of relish or joy.

The researcher's experience with the dalit community in Kerala revealed a world of staggering poverty, hunger and deprivation. The journey of dalit food started off with the hope of discovering a unique culinary culture that the community ought to be proud of. The hypothesis of the research was based on the literature review of Sharmila Rege's *Isn't this Plate Indian?: Dalit Histories and Memories of Food* which debunked the myth that dalit cuisine is not worthy to make an appearance in the dominant food industry ruled by cookbooks and cookery channels. The work, that records dishes rich in nutrition and taste, argues for a positive representation of dalit food in the mainstream food domain and addresses the silence around dalit food. Though this work provides a brilliant insight on the subject of dalit food, the observations gathered cannot be generalised as common features of dalit food. Just as the concept of homogenous national cuisine and ethnic cuisine doesn't exist, dalit cuisine also cannot be categorised as a unified entity. Each household that has its own economic stature is marked by their food choices. However much dalit food is eulogized, a large number of dalits still live on a meagre diet. In the report presented to the Ministry of Minority Affairs, 45% of the Scheduled Tribes and 33.8% of Scheduled Castes in rural India live below poverty line.

While documentation of the culinary tradition of dalits has brought dalit cuisine to the notice of the masses and has managed to receive attention through food festivals, their food gets often glorified in the process. Dalit food gets adopted as a menu option in tourist homes and resorts as a marketing strategy to enthrall food lovers and tourists. Political debates surrounding beef festivals or ban on certain foods are born when the tastes and preferences of two communities come in conflict with one another. With attention now being paid more to alternate cultures, ethnic cuisine has managed to get noticed. With novelty becoming the trend, looking for alternatives

to attract the masses has become common. Dalit food occupies luxuriant hotel spaces and is marketed with much pomp at food festivals or exhibitions. Like dalit cultural forms and art, food has also entered the field of cultural appropriation. The capitalist society that we are living in offers little space to look deep into the core of dalit issue where abject poverty rules the life of most dalits in India. Awareness on the domain of dalit food shouldn't be limited to its mere presence in an exhibition stall or a dish in a five star hotel. An understanding of the ways in which dalit food gets represented is crucial. Receiving the tag of an exotic culinary experience will not do justice to the problems that millions of dalits face on the issue of food. A study of dalit food opens up narratives of suffering, labour and survival. It portrays dalit life in all details, shedding light on the conditions of weak economic status and social discrimination.

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