

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. Douglas 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 *Douglas*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. Douglas 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 bhakaris [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 cave 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 *bhakarīs* 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 bhakarīs 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 Holeya 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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