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Eating Provisions and Practices: The Depiction of the Dalit Food in Dalit Literature[1]

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ABSTRACT:

Food practices across the Indian subcontinent have remained variegated based on the difference in caste, region, and religion. Eating preferences, likes and dislikes, inevitably marks social differences. While on one hand, the sharing of food creates intimacy and solidarity, the scarcity of food spoils human communities, on the other. As such the consumption of food has cultural and political dimensions whereby food habits impinge upon unequal power structures and social hierarchies. The traditionally marginal groups such as the Dalits, in their autobiographies, inevitably record instances of hunger, malnutrition, scarcity of food, and hence, non-normative/non-conformist eating practices. The process of food intake – rejection and consumption – draws discriminatory boundaries even in the 21st Century. By affirming the supremacy of their foods and food practices, certain sections continue to denigrate and dehumanize the

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'others'. This paper attempts to conclude that, food based perceptions and casteism are inextricably interlinked concepts.

KEYWORDS:

Food, Caste, Ambedkar, Dalit Literature, Culinary Practices, testimonio, sunaltern

Food practices across the Indian subcontinent have remained variegated based on the difference in caste, region, and religion. Eating preferences, likes and dislikes, inevitably marks social differences. While on one hand, the sharing of food creates intimacy and solidarity, the scarcity of food spoils human communities, on the other. As such the consumption of food has cultural and political dimensions whereby food habits impinge upon unequal power structures and social hierarchies. The differential nature of caste and class relations determines one's access to food resources. Food is the site of several belief systems, giving way to discrimination, humiliation, and starvation. Hence, symbolically, it can be seen as a marker of social and economic well-being since it signals one's rank in the social ladder. The traditionally marginal groups such as the Dalits, in their autobiographies, inevitably record instances of hunger, malnutrition, scarcity of food, and hence, non-normative/non-conformist eating practices.

Ambedkar conjectures that the aboriginal beef-eating 'broken men', post-Aryan invasion, were ascribed menial and manual labor followed by the statutory untouchable status. It was in consequence with the 'difference' in religious preference – Buddhism over Hinduism – that the original inhabitants were also admonished for their eating practices. They were categorized as untouchables, denied access to the central village space, and forced to remove animal carcasses and human waste from the village. Dalit literature, which is essentially shaped by historio-political consciousness and the tool of experience, aims at deconstructing the ages-long discrimination and deprivation the Dalits have faced as a community. In this paper, hence, an attempt has been made to

offer an investigation of how casteist views are determined, upheld, and propagated by means of food practices with due reference to Dalit literature.

In Dalit testimonios such as Baby Kamble's *Jina Amuche* (1986), Om Prakash Valmiki's *Jhoothan* (1999), multiple incidents encapture starvation and non-availability of provisions. The Mahar community within Kamble's narrative, appears to have become adapted to eat dead animals' meat; left-overs from the upper-caste households and marriage feasts; and stale bhakris. Valmiki's *Jhoothan*, a self-conscious Dalit literary text, portrays the determination of the author's mother to overturn the basketful of 'jhoothan' at a wedding on being humiliated by a high-caste Tyagi. Similarly, in her autobiography, *Closed Doors* (1983), Mukta Sarvagod recalls how her father often used to narrate instances where the upper caste patrons would give only the rotten grains to the Mahars as wages, if at all. Even in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2009), there are references to the humiliation faced by the poor untouchables for their 'monstrous' hunger. Pawar records how the sharing of lunch-boxes at the school used to be indicative of the difference in economic stature between the upper and lower caste girls, which also helped in consolidating the demarcation between the public and the counterpublic space.

A seminal, one of its kind, work on Dalit culinary practices, edited by the late sociologist, Sharmila Rege, *Isn't this Plate Indian?: Dalit Histories and Memories of Food*, considers the impact of the caste discourse on Dalit food practices in the traditional as well as the modern context. It is a collection of narratives incorporating oral 'memoirs' of twelve Dalit women who were interviewed with the sole aim to retrieve and document Dalit food and recipes. It aimed to challenge the misconceived notion that the pan-Indian culinary tradition is that of vegetarianism. The idea behind the book, as Rege mentions in the introduction, struck Rege while conducting a classroom course on the correlation between gender and caste with special reference to Dalit Women's testimonios. Rege notes: "At this point in the course, the centrality of hunger and food

in memory and articulations of pain, humiliation, assertions of self respect, taste of own culinary skills and distaste for 'bland brahmanical' food was pointing to the limitations of structural anthropological discourse on caste and food and the sanskritisation model of understanding changes in caste based eating and drinking practices." (2009 : iii).

Such a project invariably brings to light the notion that even food can be a potent site for research—literary or otherwise. In an earlier work as well, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, Rege had minutely focused on the significance of instances about food and hunger as portrayed in Dalit Women's testimonios. A reading of Dalit literature — be it in the form of autobiographies, poetry, or fiction — brings to attention the question of food. The consumption of 'joothan' (left-over food) to curb hunger is shown to be regular mass exercise in most of the Dalit memoirs, especially Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life.* The memoirs of caste are hence intertwined with either the memories of food, or its absence.

Food, being a source domain, is a biological need. It is necessary for one's survival and well-being. To derive nutrition out of it is as important as deriving taste. For this reason, Gopal Guru in his article titled "Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies" writes that the right to food is a human right, and its denial is the violation of human rights. A metaphor works amidst an analogy where two different things are juxtaposed with each other, and one is experienced and understood in relation with the other (Lakoff and Johnson, 5). In the words of Meryl Altman, "Metaphors … are part of a power structure (or struggle), part of the way in which groups of various sorts delineate their discursive boundaries, name and expel the other, express and reinforce their bonds, their sense of being "at home" with each other." (502).

One of the predominant metaphors as used by Dalit writers is that of 'joothan' which generally signifies the leftover food as given or thrown by the local patrons. The term in itself reflects the nature of servility of the ones at the receiving end. In stark contrast to the fresh cooked food, in the usage of this term, emphasis is laid on the

food's qualitative aspect and not the quantitative one. Another similar metaphor used to signify the traditional Dalit food is that of 'poisoned bread' which refers to the decomposed, degenerated, and often rotten food as available to the Dalits. Furthermore, the recurring use of terms and phrases such as 'bellyful', 'mouthful', and 'to our hearts' content', appear emblematic in these writers' recollection of the memories of food and hunger, for the hunger used to be rarely satiated. Ironically, "to their hearts' content" is a recurring phrase used by the author to convey how these so-called lower caste peoples' 'satisfaction' was drastically limited. To quote a few lines from one of Namdeo Dhasal's powerfully crafted poem, "Hunger":

"Hunger
There's not a single grain in our house today
Not a single 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).

Noting some of the socio-cultural factors responsible behind the issues related to hunger with due reference to his study, in *Ash in the Belly: India's Unfinished Battle Against Hunger*, Harsh Mander writes: "The hunger of socially discriminated groups is no doubt produced, re-produced and sustained by the fact that they constitute the large majority of unorganized workers, artisans, slum dwellers, and landless, marginal and small farmers in rain-fed areas. However, the social barriers to their food rights are rarely addressed in public policy and civil society action." (62). Mander postulates that

in order to successfully respond to the issues related to hunger, the government and associated organizations need to minutely study and rule out these factors by addressing them in the public policy and action plans.

The shameful continuation of child malnutrition, maternal mortality among undernourished pregnant women, and hunger amongst the lower castes, senior citizens, and disabled people, writes Mander, is an outcome of systematic social exclusion. In "Gender, Social Exclusion and Food", he postulates that: "Hunger is produced and reproduced in families that discriminate against girls and women in matters of food and health care: by the discrimination against single women; by venal practices of untouchability, caste and religious discrimination and debt bondage; by grown children who neglect and discard the aged; by failures of community support systems for the disabled and infirm; by communities which have discarded cultural traditions to extend food and social security to the poor; by landlessness and depletion of forests; and by indifferent markets that cater not to peoples' needs but only to their capacity to pay." (39).

The Hindu dominated South Asian society has never had an economically sustainable social structure. In 1927, B. R. Ambedkar had to initiate a struggle – the Mahad Satyagraha – to gain as basic a right for the Dalits as access to public water resources. Astonishing instances of hunger, consequently, fill in the pages of Dalit literature. The prevalence of 'graded inequality' and its impact thereof in terms of the food practices can be gauged in Kamble's narrative. She writes: "Dry meat pieces would be available only with the Mahars of the sixteenth share. The other houses did not have anything to eat. Those people were like insects crawling around in hunger. With no food to eat, at least a couple of people would be ill in each house, lying down in rags. They would be almost lifeless with hunger since even ordinary food was scarce." (103).

One of the recent collective Dalit initiatives led by the Dalit Camera team spearheaded by B. Ravichandran, is a book titled *Hatred in the Belly*. In the introduction,

the initiative is referred to as the 'Ambedkar Age Collective' and it is declared that— "[T]he Brahmin or the white man shall no more define us; our book, *Hatred in the Belly* shall define them now." (5). It is noteworthy that in order to challenge brahmanic hegemony, they chose to use the metaphor of the 'belly', whereby the bearers of the sacred thread are referred to as the traditional harbingers of hatred against the Dalits.

Food and its associated practices determine the conceptualization of ethnicity and construction of cultural identity. Food serves as a metaphor for certain dominant ethnic groups to direct aversion towards certain other groups for practicing different food habits that they consider as non-normative. Differences in cultural values in terms of skin color, clothes, lifestyles, and food habits as held by different communities, hence, help in the construction of the individual as well as collective identities. To quote Gopal Guru— "The upper castes have not only prescribed food for themselves, they have designated foods for other castes as well. For example, in Manu's ritual strictures, *Jhootan* and the meat of dead cattle were prescribed to the Untouchables as their staple foods. […] The Untouchables were at the receiving end of the discarded resources; the *Jhootan*, cast off cloth, and dead cattle. The irony is that the Untouchables produced food grain but were denied the legitimate share of it. They got only the inferior part of this product (coarse grain, grain gleaned out of cow dung, *Jhootan*, and cast-off clothes)." (11)

Brahminic lifestyle which is strikingly marked by surplus and abundance has seldom had a clue about the scarcity plaguing the lives of the untouchables. The Brahminic perception about fasting to please the divine stands in stark contrast to the Dalits' compulsive fasting on account of the lack of resources. The Hindu idea of fasting is based on the notion that 'you have the food, but you are not eating', whereas for the Dalits, there is no choice rather 'you do not have the food, and hence not eating. A similar stance was opted by Gandhi to go on a fast-unto-death demanding the annulment of the Poona Pact. Ambedkar, having had the first hand Dalit experience of

'scarcity', sought to achieve 'positive discrimination' in the form of separate electoral rights. Gandhi's strategic refusal to eat in order to reclaim Hindu unity further suggests how Brahmins have been ignorant with respect to the lives of utter deprivation that the Dalits were condemned to live in. In one of his recent books, *The Cracked Mirror*, Gopal Guru establishes that the Dalit experience constitutes an 'ownership' to the idea of oppression. The Dalits, hence, do not have the choice to not be a Dalit subject.

In *Isn't This Plate Indian?*, Rege affirms: "Eating habits and foods starkly mark the boundaries between the pure and the polluted, as well as between the upper and lower class, male and female, humans and god. Conversely, what kinds of food are 'permitted', 'tolerated' and 'enforced' for consumption and the ways in which they are consumed are structured primarily by the caste, class, [and] gender inequalities in society." (63). The book acknowledges that there is a necessary correlation between food and caste for it was the Brahminical order which in the first place decided who is to eat what and later on, solidified these distinctions using the duality of purity and pollution. As per the Dharmic Hindu codes, there are three modes of existence—*Sattva* (purity and positivity), *Rajas* (Mixture of purity and pollution), and *Tamas* (pollution and negativity). As the Brahmins ascribed to themselves the *sattva* attributes, they resorted to *sattvic* diet incorporating dairy products and vegetables; whereas the non-Brahmins, other than the untouchables, who were also non-vegetarians but they did not eat beef and dead animals' meat, were put in the second category, *rajas*; while the untouchables or the broken men were ascribed *tamas* attributes.

In his much acclaimed crafted mythologies, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables*, Ambedkar notes that at several places in the Vedas and Hindu Dharma Shastras, the Brahmins are themselves referred to as beef-eaters. He argues that it was on account of the clash of Brahminism and Buddhism that Brahmins chose to not only become vegetarians and give up beef-eating, but as a strategy for introducing a hierarchical structure and placing themselves up above everyone else, began to worship the cow so much so that they denounced beef-eating as a sacrilege.

The defeated race of the indigenous men who refused to conform to the dictates of the new religion, were eventually denigrated as unfit for association primarily because of two reasons:

1. Difference in religious belief (Buddhism over Hinduism)
2. Difference in eating practices (beef-eaters)

When food practices are understood in line with the ideology of purity and pollution, it inevitably leads to the creation of social hierarchies. Further feeding off this notion, Gopal Guru convincingly argues that— "Dalits use non-vegetarian food as a potent source to counter the nationalist construction of Indian *Thali*. [T]he Dalits have used non-vegetarian food, particularly beef, as a powerful cultural medium to undercut the culturally superior status of the upper castes, which seek to chain the Dalits to a "Savage Identity"." (15). Traditional Dalit occupations as prescribed by caste laws include— skinning cows and buffaloes to make leather, cleaning dead animals' carcasses, sweeping, and manual scavenging. These occupations, which were markedly hereditary in nature, could hardly fetch them enough money so as to arrange for the food and clothes of the numerous family members. In lieu of the lack of resources and absence of any choice for the economics of survival, the Dalits developed cuisines such as Rakti (a Dalit delicacy made of the cattle's coagulated blood), red chili-based curry, roasted bhakri, jaggery, and fat from the meat of dead cattles came to be used for frying purposes. Interestingly, these Dalit cuisines were developed so as to extract the maximum out of the available resources. They did not wish to waste the blood, hence Rakti. Moreover, pork was at the Dalits' disposal as the upper castes did not need it – neither for the dairy products nor for the meat. Certain Dalit communities in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are likewise known for their taste for rats (the Musahari). The Valmikis, who were largely patronized by the upper-caste households in lieu of the endless tasks they were made to do, were dependent on their leftover food. Since cattle were largely domesticated in the upper-caste households, the Dalits could access them only when the cattle were dead.

In *The Prisons We Broke*, Kamble notes – "The Mahars considered animal epidemics like diphtheria or dysentery a boon. Every day at least four or five animals would die. The internal organs of the dead animals would decay in stages. In some animals, organ like the liver, for instance, would be as hard as stones; whereas, in other animals, the organs would be nothing but mush, like overcooked rice. The inside of some animals would be putrid, filled with puss and infected with maggots. There would be a horrid, foul smell! It was worse than hell! But we did not throw away even such animals. We cut off the infected parts full of puss, and convinced ourselves that it was now safe to eat the meat." (85).

The subaltern Dalits who have had no access to fresh cooked food have been relying on left over, rotten food, and over the time, created and adapted Dalit dishes including the meat of dead cattle. For months, they used to store the dead sickly animals' meat in earthen pots, and in the absence of any other food source, roast it on the *tawa*, eat, and make merry. With reference to Baby Kamble's testimonios, Gopal Guru observes that it is heartening to note that even as early as only seventy years back, the Maharashtrian Mahars considered it to be a privilege to marry off their daughters in the families which had a greater share of stored dried meat of dead cattles. (12). Non-availability of resources in difficult times led them to invent ways to preserve the dead animals' meat for later consumption.

In the post-Independence scenario, however, thereby acclaiming dignity, certain numbers of Middle class Dalits showcase enhanced cultural aspiration and change in cultural taste. Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar strikingly note the significance of the Ambedkarite era which saw the bourgeoning of their consciousness under the spell of Ambedkar's speeches with regard to abolishing the practice of eating dead animals' flesh, on one hand, and abolishing Hinduism, on the other. Under the sway of Ambedkarite *chetna*, they stopped eating *joothan* and dead animal meat as a strategy to assert self-respect, and devour their 'savage' identity so as to claim a civilized one.

The process of food intake – rejection and consumption – draws discriminatory boundaries even in the 21st Century. As the apparatus of modernity and globalization provides the right to choose 'quality' food to the people from all castes, multiple cultures and religions have today come together to pose a unified identity. A range of liberating structures such as McDonalds and KFC, which offer tastes, allows the Dalits to counter the memories of deprivation, poverty, and hunger by partaking the same food as the upper castes in the same space. Such an actualization of the melting pot theory, however, has not as yet achieved 'annihilation of caste'. By affirming the supremacy of their foods and food practices, certain sections continue to denigrate and dehumanize the 'others'. For this reason, I conclude by stating that, food based perceptions and casteism are inextricably interlinked concepts.

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