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Breaking Bread, Shattering Chains: Food, Caste, and Resistance in Dalit Women's Narratives

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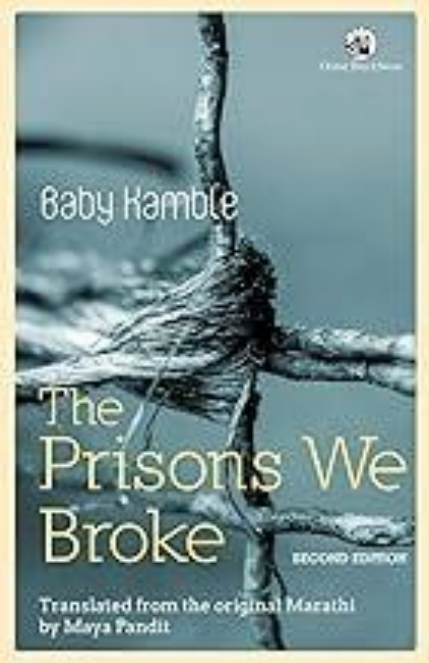

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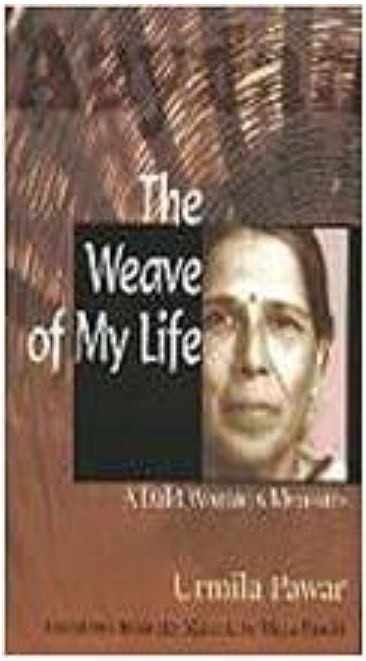
Abstract

Food in Dalit women's lives is deeply intertwined with caste and gender oppression, as illustrated in the autobiographical narratives of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2018) and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2009). These texts expose how caste hierarchies dictate access to food, relegating Dalit women to consuming discarded scraps, coarse grains, and foraged items, while the notion of purity and pollution further marginalizes them. However, food is not merely a site of deprivation but also an instrument of resilience and defiance. The communal preparation and sharing of meals foster solidarity among Dalit women, challenging their systemic exclusion. Moreover, the consumption of 'impure' foods such as beef and dried fish serves as a direct resistance to the so-called upper caste dietary norms. At the same time,

in order to reclaim their agency, Dalit women dictate their access to food through culinary creativity and collective sustenance. These narratives not only document oppression but also forms a reposition of Dalit food practices as acts of survival, identity, and resistance, challenging dominant caste narratives and reclaiming dignity.

Keywords: Dalit women, food, oppression, *joothan*, class



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Introduction

Food apart from being the source of sustenance is also a fundamental element through which cultural power is exercised. From being a genesis of delight, memory and identity formation, food also carries with it generation of pain, trauma, and oppression. The famous Indian political scientist Gopal Guru in "Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies," (2009) has navigated a new dimension in Dalit discourse that observes how the freshness and sweetness of cooked food serve as a major criterion in determining its taste and acceptance in Indian culture. It is obvious that freshly prepared food with equally fresh ingredients is always considered of superior taste as compared to stale or leftover food. For many people in India, desserts are intricate dishes meant for the rich as they become "a hegemonic presence in the cultural practices of the poor" according to Guru Gopal.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu says that taste is determined by the social and cultural position from which it emerges. This paper traces the ideological impositions on food in the

Indian context. These impositions are guided by sociological and cultural norms which are predominantly upper caste Hindu principles. According to the societal norms, the Dalits are supposed to eat the stale and leftover food. Their meals are meant to be spicy to hide the stench of the stale food. It is generally the meat of the dead animal or the *joothan* (leftover or rotten food) which is prescribed as the staple meal of the Dalits which literally means "broken" that is seen in a revolutionary sense, relating to the "material social experience" of marginalization of the culture and stratification of caste (Guru, 2005).

The literal meaning of the Hindi word *joothan*, as Arun Prabha Mukherjee explains, is food left on a plate that is to be thrown in the garbage. But such food would be characterized as *joothan* only if someone else were to eat it. This particular term has connotations of purity and pollution attached to it, as the root word *jootha* literally means "polluted" (Valmiki, 2003). In *The Prisons We Broke*, the Dalit author from Maharashtra, Baby Kamble describes their food intake as largely relying on stale and putrid leftovers, which is also the title of the Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan* (2003), meaning scraps of food left on a plate, that signifies pollution through the saliva, a concept in Hindu Brahminical culture.

Freshly cooked vegetarian food and food items containing sweet flavours are not only considered to be of superior quality but also pure. The sense of civilised identity is specifically connected with the upper castes, practicing certain food norms where a certain deviation would be considered savage. It also implies that desserts and sweetness in food imply a sense of superiority because it is a strong flavour believed to regulate the mood and supposedly positive factor as per societal norms. Therefore, according to Guru, freshly cooked food and desserts serve as the standard food choices of the society which can only be afforded by the upper class.

The association of supposed sense of civilised identity only to certain food practices emphasise a notion of savage identity that disparages people who do not conform to such standardised food habits due to economic, cultural and social conditions. In the Indian state, Maharashtra, a dessert made of yogurt called *sreekhand* becomes an object of disdain only because it resembles *pithala* which is a kind of curry made with gram flour (Guru, 2009, p. 15). Therefore, society arouses a sense of humiliation for the people who cannot differentiate between the two due to cultural and economic conditions.

Since food practice is also a determinant aspect of creating caste hierarchies in Indian society, Barthes points out that there is "a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history" (Barthes, 1972, 10). The majority of Dalit food emerged through the economics of survival, utilizing whatever resources were available. Hence, they are pragmatic choices rather than deliberate. It is the economic distress that forced the Dalit community to survive on the leftover portions of pricey meat, such as offal, blood, or intestines.

According to the Dalit author Omprakash Valmiki, "After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just *joothan*. And yet no one had any grudges. Or shame. Or repentance" (Valmiki, 2003, p.11). Ironically most of the basic food produce in India are yielded by the untouchables yet they are the ones who are denied any kind of access to it. They have to satisfy themselves with whatever available to them no matter how much prejudices are associated with their food practices or humiliation they have to face. Dalit food practices are often stigmatised and associated with impurity and pollution. Therefore, the degree of accessibility and control over food reflects one's position within the social hierarchies which highlights the profound disparities that exist (Counihan, 1998).

Mary Douglas' concept of purity and pollution, as outlined in her anthropological work "Purity and Danger" (1966) provides a framework for understanding how social and cultural norms shape perceptions of cleanliness, order, and boundaries within a society. In the Indian context, social boundaries have been traditionally established and upheld by dietary practices, the quality of the food consumed, and the customs surrounding food preparation and consumption.

Foods deemed as beyond human consumption mostly carry associations with the most marginalized groups, the wretched of the earth who are subjected to dehumanization (Shahani, 2020). Dalits are frequently prohibited from using the same utensils or even eating the same food as members of higher castes. This exclusion reinforces their underprivileged status by preventing them from accessing public dining establishments and water sources, marking their seclusion from society. Nevertheless, there is an unintended consequence of these coercive practices: they strengthen the bonds of solidarity and community among members of the same caste or sub-caste through these subjugations and oppressions. Which helps members of a

certain caste amplify their shared identity and cultural cohesion by adhering to particular food customs, nutritional regulations, and culinary techniques.

The Dalit Cuisine

Karl Marx in *Grundisse* (1993) mentions, "Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail, and tooth" (92). Marx's discussion of primordial hunger is the reflection of the crisis of civilization brought on by tyrannical governments. The impoverished are portrayed as inferior people who require the kindness of the civilized in hierarchical power structures. Levi Strauss (1966) has sought to understand food as a cultural system that incorporates symbols, categories, and meanings.

For Dalits, food is frequently connected to feelings of dearth, embarrassment and deprivation. Their everyday food consumption is procured through minimum wages, lacking proper nutritious supplements (Rege et al, 2009). Therefore, the concept of *joothan* exposes the injustices that are embedded at the core of the caste system where only the upper castes are supposed to enjoy the luxury and abundance of food. It is necessary to mention the Dalit cuisine has emerged out of necessity and starvation which led to the crafting of unique array of gastronomy. Sharmila Rege in "Isn't This Plate Indian?" mentions that eating habits and food choices distinctly define the lines between pure and polluted food, as well as social hierarchies, gender roles, and even the divide between humans and the divine.

At the same time, the types of food that are deemed permitted, tolerated, or mandated—along with the manner in which they are consumed—are largely shaped by societal inequalities related to caste, class, and gender (Rege, 2009, p. 63). Dalit cuisine is a testament of the adeptness shown by the Dalit community to survive on whatever minimum ingredients available to them. Here, the Dalit women play an important part by challenging the societal stereotypes along with upholding their own culinary traditions. Food continues to be a battleground for caste-based discrimination. Dalit women have cultivated a culinary tradition centred on resilience and ingenuity. They transform leftover grains, wild greens, and neglected animal parts into nourishing meals, showcasing sustainable and anti-caste food practices long before contemporary sustainability movements gained popularity. Dalit women always endure

systemic oppression at the intersection of caste, gender, and economic disparity. Their lived experiences are marked by extreme marginalization, often rendering them invisible in mainstream feminist and social justice movements. Hence, food serves as a lens to observe the stratifications of class, caste, gender, race, and other societal divisions (Probyn, 2000).

This article will analyse two Dalit autobiographies- *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble and *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Urmila Pawar through two-fold research objectives, that is to examine how Dalit women's food narratives challenge caste-based culinary hierarchies and to explore how Dalit women redefine their culinary practices as a form of identity and resistance against caste-based discrimination. The study would be guided by Arjun Appadurai's concept of gastro-politics to analyse the social dynamics and power relations revolving around food in the Hindu South Asian societies (*Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia*, 1981). Appadurai's concept of gastro-politics expands to the conflict and competition over specific cultural or economic resources as it emerges in the social transactions around food (Appadurai, 1981, p. 495). His concept will be used to explores how the ways culinary practices determine gender politics and social hierarchies. He observes how men are the decision makers on everything including the culinary practices while women are associated only with cooking and other household activities requiring physical labour.

Breaking the Shackles in *The Prisons We Broke*

Baby Kamble in her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*, portrays the oppressive conditions of the Mahar community of Maharashtra, using food as the metaphor to highlight the plight of the community. Food serves as a stark indicator of caste-based oppression. Dalit women are denied access to nutritious and sufficient food, often forced to rely on scraps, coarse grains, and foraged items for sustenance. Kamble describes the precarious ways in which Dalit families acquire food—often through hard labour or scavenging discarded leftovers from upper-caste households. This systemic deprivation underscores how food is weaponized to reinforce caste hierarchies, keeping Dalits in a state of perpetual marginalization.

The notion of purity and pollution further exacerbates food-based discrimination. Upper-caste communities view Dalit food as impure, ensuring that Dalit women remain excluded from public cooking spaces and religious offerings. The Brahmanical notion of purity and pollution dictated every aspect of Dalit lives, especially their relationship with food. Kamble's memoir

illustrates how the upper castes enforced strict dietary boundaries, refusing to consume anything touched by Dalits. This belief in pollution extended to public spaces—Dalits were not allowed to enter temples or water sources used by the upper castes. Such restrictions ensured that Dalits remained socially and physically isolated, their mere presence deemed 'polluting' by caste Hindus. The regulation of touch and food access here aligns with Appadurai's view of gastro-political governance, where food taboos serve as mechanisms of control as the caste Hindus considered food as a fundamental link between men and gods (Appadurai, 1981, p. 496).

Even in government-led initiatives like temple feasts or school midday meal schemes, Dalit women are either denied the right to cook or their prepared food is rejected by upper-caste individuals. Such practices reveal how food becomes a tool of exclusion, used to maintain caste purity while systematically alienating Dalits. Throughout her book, Kamble employs irony to underscore the harsh realities of food availability for the Mahar community. She sarcastically remarks that they had access to the "best" leftovers, the "best" carcasses, and the "best" opportunities to harvest cactus shrubs. The repeated use of the superlative "best" is a deliberate satirical device, exposing how the Mahar people were systematically denied nutritious food and instead forced to consume what others discarded.

Kamble recounts how the Mahar community would make use of animal intestines, bones, and skin to prepare meals. This was not only an act of survival but also one of innovation, as Dalit women devised ways to make these discarded parts palatable and nutritious. However, the upper-caste Hindus viewed the consumption of meat, particularly beef, as a marker of impurity, further ostracizing Dalits. Here, food choice becomes a battleground of gastro-political contestation, where the imposition of vegetarianism serves as a means of caste domination. Dalit consumption of meat, therefore, becomes an act of defiance against Brahmanical norms. Therefore, "the vaunted Hindu preoccupation with "purity and pollution," with its vast plethora of rules about contact (with their endless permuations of rank, life-stage, context, and medium), can best be seen as an encyclopedic attempt to negotiate these incompatible goals" (Appadurai, 1981, p. 507).

Kamble's narrative brings attention to the severe deprivation of basic necessities, particularly food, among Dalits. Living in extreme poverty, Mahar parents had no choice but to forage for

cactus pods to feed their starving children, despite the seeds being so tough that they felt like concrete in their stomachs. With no other means of survival, they resorted to consuming carcasses. Kamble paints a grim picture of their desperation, highlighting the tragic reality that the community found relief in the rising death toll of animals during an epidemic, as it meant a temporary increase in food supply as they were given the work of carrying away the carcasses from the localities. Through this portrayal, she critiques the structural violence that normalizes such inhumane living conditions for Dalits. The imagery of the Mahar women as created by the author, rejoicing in such condition, and singing with joy while carrying the carcasses on their heads, drenched with blood is strikingly mortifying- food collected in the worst possible way is making them content. Another significant reference to food in Kamble's book is the mention of *Bhakris*, a staple food among the Mahars. Kamble also highlights how food fosters a sense of community and solidarity. She fondly recalls her grandmother's generosity, as she turned their home into a refuge for the hungry, ensuring that no one went without food. Women from the neighbourhood would come together, sharing *Bhakris* with raw onions. The rhythmic crunching of the hard bread echoed like the roar of a factory machine, emphasizing its toughness. Yet, the shared experience of eating—rooted in companionship and mutual support—offered comfort, momentarily alleviating the pain of persistent hunger. Therefore, Guru Gopal asserts in his article "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (1995) that they have unique issues owing to their social conditions as hunger is their prime enemy while they struggle for sustenance.

A particularly striking aspect of this internalized oppression was the stark gendered disparity in access to food. As the lowest in both caste and gender hierarchies, Mahar women were often forced to beg for a handful of grains. Even during pregnancy, they go through extreme deprivation; many expectant mothers were left with nothing but the starchy water drained from boiling rice to suppress their hunger. In moments of unbearable pain, they would bind their midsections with tattered cloth to numb their empty stomachs. The grim reality Kamble presents is one where Mahar women routinely went to bed starving, victims of a cruel system that denied them even the most basic sustenance. Through this harrowing depiction, she critiques the intersection of caste and gender oppression, revealing how hunger itself became a form of systemic violence against Dalit women. Here Ruth Manorama, a leading advocate of Dalit women in India (2005) rightly points out "the Dalit women have to grapple with the discrimination due to caste hierarchy and untouchability on the one hand and extreme economic

deprivation and poverty on the other coupled with political, legal and religio-cultural discrimination." The month of *Ashadh* is an integral period for the Mahar community. They share food and "the entire village flock to the temple with varied dishes as offerings to goddess-fried delicacies, curd rice, bhajis cooked with choice spices and *kuwadya*…This food is then divided, for distribution among the Mahars in keeping their status and honour" (Kamble, 2009, p. 29).

Power and gender hierarchy play a vital role in the distribution of food as it is the men and children who receive the greater share of the offerings. Eating meat of dead cattle points out the extreme poverty of the Mahar community as they "considered animal epidemics like diphtheria or dysentery a boon" (Kamble, 2009, p. 85). She narrates the horrific experiences of how the foul-smelling animals, filled with puss and infested with maggots were made edible.

For the Mahars, food is more a symbol of their identity and resistance against oppression than necessity of life. Here, Guru Gopal narrates by using food as the marker of socio-cultural identity of a particular group, scholars argue that "the Mahars became Mahars because they were Mrutahari (those who eat dead animals)" (Guru, 2009, p. 13). Further he added that leaders like Jyotirao Phule and V.R. Shinde considered Mahars as Maha-ari (the great enemy) as viewed by the caste Hindus as their food practices as an identity marker for lower caste.

Sustenance through *The Weave of My Life*

In *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar vividly recounts a childhood marked by hunger and deprivation, highlighting how the absence of adequate food fostered feelings of inferiority. Much like Baby Kamble's reflections on the struggles of Mahar women, Pawar's autobiography also exposes the dire circumstances of Dalit women, who were often left to survive on scraps or endure prolonged starvation. The intersection of caste and gender oppression is central to her narrative, as she explores how food practices starkly delineate caste hierarchies.

Pawar recalls the glaring disparities in food consumption between upper-caste and Dalit communities. Upper-caste girls would casually discuss delicacies such as *laddoo, modak,* and *karanja*—sweets that remained completely unfamiliar to Dalit children like her. During Holi, upper-caste households, financially well-off, would indulge in lavish meals, feasting on sweet

chapatis made with molasses and *arhar dal* on the first day, followed by rich, meat-filled bondas the next. In contrast, the Mahars' celebrations were marked by scarcity, with meals consisting of coarse rice and *pithale*, a simple flour-based dish made from *kulith* (horse gram). Occasionally, they supplemented their diet with backyard-grown leafy vegetables. On other days, they relied on *bhakris* made from *milo* (red jowar) or even husk, which was so rough that swallowing it became an ordeal.

Pawar highlights the stark contrast in food consumption between upper-caste and Dalit communities. While upper-caste girls casually spoke of sweets like laddoo, modak, and karanja—treats that Dalit children had never even seen—festival meals further underscored this disparity. During Holi, wealthier upper-caste families relished extravagant feasts, beginning with sweet chapatis made from molasses and *arhar* dal, followed by hearty, meat-stuffed bondas. In stark contrast, the Mahars' celebrations were marked by scarcity, with meals comprising coarse rice and pithale, a simple dish made from kulith (horse gram) flour. Occasionally, they managed to include homegrown leafy vegetables. Sometimes their diet also depended on bhakris made from milo (red jowar) or even husk, which was so coarse that eating it was a struggle.

She remembers with greater joy a dish called katyacha motla, prepared from a little fish that is of finger-length. These little river fish after being carefully cleaned, a paste made of amsul (dried kokum), turmeric, oil, and salt were applied and prepared for cooking. Their culinary practices frequently frequently included fishes like mushi, wagala, and shingta, which are thick-skinned and foul-smelling that people from higher castes tend to avoid. Rice was the major ingredient in their not so socially accepted cuisine, which persisted even during festivities.

Despite such hardship, Pawar finds moments of joy in their modest meals. She fondly recalls the rare treat of eating *bhakris* with dried fish, which, though inexpensive, brought flavor and satisfaction when fried with onions, red chili powder, and salt. She also describes the poor women who travelled to Ratnagiri to sell mangoes, jackfruit, and firewood, making time to bake such fish along the way. Through these accounts, Pawar not only exposes the stark inequalities in food access but also emphasizes the resilience and resourcefulness of Dalit women, who found ways to create sustenance and community despite systemic deprivation. Her intricate weaving of Mahar identity through food reflects the deep-rooted caste, class, and

gender-based subjugation. Expensive fish like *surmai* and *pomfret*, along with sweets such as *halwa*, were luxuries that remained out of reach for her community. Her autobiography is rich with memories of food and culinary practices that shaped her childhood and left a lasting imprint on her life.

Even in the face of such adversity, Pawar finds happiness in their simple meals. She remembers the peculiar pleasure of eating bhakris with dried fish, which, despite being cheap, enhanced gustatory and satisfaction when fried with salt, onions, and red chili powder. She also talks about the impoverished woman who had time to bake these fish while traveling to Ratnagiri to sell firewood, jackfruit, and mangoes. In addition to highlighting the glaring disparities in food access, Pawar's testimonies highlight the tenacity and creativity of Dalit women, who managed to establish communities and a means of sustenance in the face of prevailing injustice. The profound caste, class, and gender-based oppression is reflected in her elaborate culinary weaving of Mahar identity. Sweets like halwa and fancy fishes like surmai and pomfret were indulgences that her community could not afford. The memories of food and culinary practices of her early years have an intense effect on her life autobiography that also established her identity.

Pawar also mentions several delicacies that were prepared to celebrate festivities, desserts made of rice flour, such as *kheer*—a sweet preparation made with rice flour, molasses, and coconut—and *gharge*, a dish combining rice flour with shredded cucumber and a touch of oil. Ganapati festival is an integral part of their culture, her family would make *modak*, a traditional sweet dumpling of rice flour filled with molasses and coconut for the occasion. “Rice was our staple food. Special dishes for festivals were made from rice flour. Sweet kheer was made using rice flour cooked with molasses and coconut, *gharge* with rice flour mixed with shredded cucumber and baked with a little oil, and, for the famous Ganapati festival, *modak* with rice flour cooked with molasses and coconut! In our community, my mother was the only one who could make *modak* well. To do so, it is necessary to cook rice flour and knead it well. Small balls of cooked flour have to be flattened into small round shapes called puri. The puri has to be rolled in a round shape, with a spoonful of sweet filling inside made from coconut and molasses. Folding the puri into petal-like shapes to be joined at the end like a crown, without spilling the filling inside, is an art by itself! It is not at all an easy dish to make, but Aaye had mastered the art.” (Pawar, 2009, p. 99-100).

Another particularly cherished memory of gastronomic pleasure is of *bhanore*, a cake-like treat her mother prepared for festive occasions or as a gift for relatives. It was made by mixing molasses, coconut, and turmeric with thick rice flour, then cooking the mixture in an oil-coated pot placed over hot coal. "Aaye used to make a sweet dish called *bhanore* either at festive times or as a gift for relatives. This was a favorite dish of mine. It tasted like cake and was easy to make" (Pawar, 2009, p.100-101).

Cowan links sweet tastes with sweet feminine dispositions and salty ones with male dispositions, and power with pleasure, suggesting the difficulty of contesting such formulations both because of their "naturalness" and their seeming "triviality" (Cowan, 1991, p. 181). These rare moments of gustatory pleasure serve as a cherished memory that adds a different dimension to Pawar's autobiography, narrating how ordinary food could have a tantelising experience for the tastebuds.

Much like Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke*, Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* connects food with the lived experiences of the Mahar community, underscoring how caste hierarchy dictated not only access to resources but also the very nature of sustenance. Through these recollections, Pawar highlights the resilience of Dalit women, who, despite deprivation, preserved culinary traditions that spoke to both their struggles and their unyielding spirit.

Appadurai's gastro-politics highlights how food is an arena where social power is negotiated and contested. In Pawar's memoir, food is emblematic of oppression, with Dalits being forced to consume discarded or inferior foodstuffs due to their marginalized position. The act of preparing and consuming meat, for instance, often marks a boundary between the Dalit and upper-caste communities, reinforcing social stratification. The memoir underscores how food-related taboos and prohibitions serve as mechanisms of social control, restricting Dalit access to resources and reinforcing their 'untouchability' (Appadurai, 1981, p. 497)

At the same time, Dalit food practices become a form of cultural assertion and resistance. By embracing and celebrating their culinary traditions, Dalit communities reclaim agency over their identities. This counters the Brahminical purity-pollution dichotomy that seeks to stigmatize their diets. Pawar's narrative does not merely present food as a site of deprivation

but also as a means of community building and resilience, where shared meals serve as acts of solidarity and resistance against caste-based exclusion.

Pawar documents how Dalit households are divided by gender in terms of food consumption and financial duties. A large percentage of Dalit men's earnings are spent on alcohol, and many of them neglect to take financial responsibility for their own households. Additionally, more nutritious foods are separately prepared for the male family members, demonstrating the gendered differences in food intake in the home. As Appadurai's gastro-politics reflects in South Asian cultures, the complex regulations around food are culturally structured attempts to counteract the way that food tends to homogenize interpersonal relationships. These guidelines control interactions among castes, forbid certain class and caste to consume specific foods, limit the use of food in particular situations, and specify how food should be prepared, served and consumed by different individuals (Appadurai, 1981, p. 507).

Pawar's family relied on a simple diet consisting of coarse rice, gram flour curry (*pithale*), leafy vegetables, bread (*bhakri*) made from millet or husk, and small dried fish seasoned with onions, red chili powder, and salt as they faced economic hardships after her father's death. The author's portrayal of Mahar women relying on leftovers or going hungry underscores the systemic injustices perpetuated against Dalit communities, especially Dalit women who are victims of both casteism and sexism.

The intersectionality of caste and gender oppression is starkly evident in her narrative, highlighting how these women faced multiple layers of discrimination and deprivation. The detailed account of their food serves as a metaphor for survival, cultural identity, and the everyday resistance against the socio-economic challenges imposed by their lower caste status. Mahar women faced challenges in accessing nutritious food, as evidenced by their consumption of dry bread and cheap, roasted fish before embarking on strenuous tasks like climbing uphills from the morning market. This indicates a lack of time and resources to adequately nourish themselves, prioritizing the needs of their children over their own. Pawar elaborates on how Mahar women, in the absence of their menfolk, resorted to consuming the leftover stock used by the affluent to boil their fish.

Even certain dishes causing diseases such as diarrhoea were consumed by women. Pawar explains the preparation of one such dish, "The rich stored the flesh of *sode*, *tisrya*, or mule; poor people stored the water in which these fish were boiled. The stock was boiled till it became a thick-like sauce and was then stored in bottles. This was called *kaat*." (Pawar, 2009, p. 100). The women cooks this with chili powder and salt to make a dish which is called *saar*. Pawar describes a number of situations in which food causes extreme humiliation and embarrassment in public settings. For Dalits in particular, caste stereotypes and constraints weigh heavily on the act of eating. The upper castes often equate the eating postures of Dalits to defecating, "as if they were about to shit" (Pawar, 2009, p. 20). This comparison not only dehumanizes but also serves to reinforce caste hierarchies, equating Dalit bodies with impurity and unworthiness.

There is an instance mentioned in the autobiography where a Dalit woman from the Mahar community is subjected to violence at the hands of *Daldin* fisherwomen "for trying to buy fish from them" (Pawar, 2009, p. 80). Here, the purchase of fish represents the complex interactions across caste boundaries that goes beyond an ordinary economic transaction which reflects the institutionalized and systemic prejudice that controls all facets of life, including what can be eaten, who can eat it, and where it can be eaten. The dehumanisation of Dalits at the hands of the upper castes was not only restricted at to their dietary practices but also to their innate human response to food like hunger and appetite. Pawar recounts an instance from her school days where in a gathering, she was mentally harassed for her appetite. She narrates with horrification that in the gathering she was not allowed to be involved with any culinary preparations, "They did not allow me to touch anything, though 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 had eaten" (Pawar, 2009, p. 110). This humiliation she went through is representative of the more extensive dehumanization Dalits encounter, where their fundamental desires and basic requirements are ridiculed and treated with contempt, enforcing their exclusion and reinforcing the cruel hierarchies that govern societal interactions.

The hunger of Dalits is reflected as "monstrous" by the society not only because of their culinary practices but also because of their lack of dignity, respect, and humanity. Portraying them as inherently greedy and lacking in self-control and comparing them to animals like

"goats" or "monsters" (Pawar, 2009, p. 102) dehumanizes them and reinforces the perception of their inferior status in society. Pawar's unwillingness to bring a lunchbox to school effectively demonstrates how caste, class, and food are intertwined, transforming a routine school activity as a reflection of social hierarchy. This kind of notion is reflected in the chapter "Bizarre Foods: Food, Filth, and the Foreign in the Culinary Contact Zone," where Gitanjali Shahani writes, "In the contact zone, particularly, food is frequently the object of disgust precisely because it is the marker of sameness and difference (Shahani, 2020, p. 118).Pawar feels embarrassed of her tiffin not because of the food but because of what it represents to the mainstream society- poverty, caste, and the prejudices attached to it. She mentions that she was so embarrassed, therefore, "would not even talk about it with her classmates" (Pawar 2009, 101). The public space like school which should have been a juncture of knowledge and discipline, becomes a space of vulnerability, and potential humiliation, where caste and economic disparities are highlighted.

By examining the dynamics of food taboos, Mary Douglas (1966) highlights how food practices become powerful symbols of social identity and hierarchy in caste-based societies. These taboos uphold caste-based inequality and discrimination by dictating social interactions and relationships in addition to food choices. Even the most basic gestures of hospitality and generosity are corrupted by caste-based prejudices, as Pawar's experience illustrates in the story, highlighting the pervasive stereotypes and social exclusion Dalits encounter.

During the celebration of Pawar's younger daughter, Manini's birthday, she invited her friend Kishori and her brother for the cake cutting ceremony. Both of them came, ate the cake and gleefully went home, celebrating the birthday. On reaching home Kishori's brother told their mother that he had seen the photographs of Buddha and Ambedkar at the author's home. This made the woman to rush to Pawar's home and without even stepping inside, she started hurling abuses to the, "We did not know that you belonged to this particular caste! That is why I sent my children to you. From now on, don't give my daughter anything to eat if she comes to your house. We are Marathas. We cannot eat with you. (Pawar, 2009, p. 202). Kishori's mother's outright refusal to allow her daughter to eat anything given by Urmila emphasizes the deep-seated beliefs in purity and pollution that underpin caste-based discrimination. The rejection and disdain faced by Urmila illustrate how food practices become potent symbols of Dalit identity and the pervasive discrimination faced by Dalit communities. The blatant reluctance

of Kishori's mother to let her daughter consume anything that Pawar gave her highlights the ingrained notions of contamination and purity that serve as the foundation for discrimination based on caste. This rejection and contempt serve as an example of how food customs serve as powerful markers of Dalit identity and the widespread prejudice that Dalit people have to negotiate with.

Conclusion

Food plays a crucial role in shaping Dalit identity, serving as a site of both oppression and resistance. The food choices, consumption practices, and culinary traditions of Dalits reflect their historical experiences of caste-based discrimination. The narratives of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar reveal the deep entanglement of food with caste, gender, and systemic oppression. Their autobiographical accounts illustrate how food is not merely a source of sustenance but a site of exclusion, resilience, and defiance. Denied access to nutritious food, Dalit women have historically been forced to survive on discarded leftovers, coarse grains, and foraged items—an enduring symbol of caste-based deprivation. The rigid hierarchies of purity and pollution further reinforce their marginalization, positioning their cuisine as inferior and their food practices as impure.

However, food in these narratives is also a powerful instrument of survival and solidarity. The communal preparation and sharing of meals among Dalit women emerge as acts of defiance against a system that seeks to isolate them. The consumption of foods deemed impure by upper-caste norms—such as beef, dried fish, and foraged greens—represents not just an act of necessity but a deliberate assertion of identity against Brahminical dietary hegemony. In their kitchens and communal spaces, Dalit women transform food from a marker of oppression into an expression of resilience and agency.

The double burden of caste and gender further compounds Dalit women's struggles. Their access to food is not only dictated by caste hierarchy but also by patriarchal norms within their own community. Often the last to eat, they are denied even the most basic nourishment, their hunger silenced by social expectations and economic hardship. The heartbreaking realities of pregnant women subsisting on rice water or tying cloth around their stomachs to suppress hunger reflect the depth of their suffering. Yet, their ability to create sustenance out of scarcity, to preserve culinary traditions, and to sustain each other through collective struggle speaks to their enduring strength.

Through their memoirs, Kamble and Pawar do more than document deprivation—they reclaim the dignity of Dalit women in the politics of food. By giving voice to their experiences, they challenge dominant narratives that erase or stigmatize Dalit food cultures. Their writings assert that food, far from being a passive reflection of caste oppression, is also an active site of resistance, identity, and communal resilience. In doing so, they reshape the discourse around caste and food, ensuring that the struggles and strength of Dalit women are neither forgotten nor ignored.

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