

# **DALITS AND THEIR CUISINE : A JOURNEY OF IDENTITY, RESILIENCE, AND CULINARY HERITAGE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Dalit concern is a by no means ending phenomenon within the Indian scenario, also the cases of atrocities and discrimination against them is in no way a new topic of discussion. This text tries to unveil the ingesting habits of dalits at some stage in the country, alongside certain interrogations about their cuisine, How is their meals related to their subculture? And so forth. For this enquiry, writings related to Dalit culture such as the autobiographies of two female dalit authors Urmila Pawar and Bama are taken into consideration. A deep look into the consuming subculture of dalits, the huge essence of caste hegemony and upper caste hindu factors can be traced.

A small peep into the dalit kitchen might not create novelty but will generally tend people in general to question their own cuisine and how it got here to be. Whether the cuisine of dalits is directly or passively affected by the caste norms and barriers which are all prevalent till date, is also being analyzed.

Keywords: **Dalit Cuisine, Food and subculture, Diet politics.**

### **DALITS AND THEIR CUISINE**

Dalits are considered as scheduled castes in India in legal and constitutional frame. According to the census of 2011, there are approximately 200 million dalits in India. This scheduled caste includes the converts to Sikhism but doesn't include the converts to Islam and Christianity as per the global multidimensional poverty index. Though the constitutionally guaranteed actions have made positive attributes to the delegation of Dalits in educational institutions, government organizations and also in elections, the dalits go on to persist in the most deprived position of the society, in the most inhumane and degrading status. A major percentage of the dalits live in rural conditions and their most acute issue is that of economic exploitation, they are mostly farmers or landless laborers and most of them suffer debts, also they are constrained to work off all the debts by bonded labor even though forced and bonded labor was abolished by law in 1976. The laborers take loans from a money lender or a landlord and accede to do labor for the lender until the debt is cleared. As the interest for the debt money increases the farmer fails to pay back the loan and the debt is passed into the next generation of the farmer and so on . Mob violence, mostly by landlords against dalits, is also a common issue. Huge numbers of dalits migrate to towns and places of less employment or to rustic areas in various parts of India, where also labor is scarce. Most of their families have left the rural areas and migrated to slums and outskirts of the fast developing cities. There also they are made to do worse, dirty and menial jobs for very low wages. However, in several places age-old jobs such as sweeping have been organized by the government unions providing the laborers work and wages regularly. Most of the dalits work as mere day laborers in lower factories, quarries and other industrial and establishment sites and as rickshaw drivers or end up doing petty trades. There are many dalits who have employed themselves in safe jobs such as in areas of public service, banking, railways or in private industries. The citizens in these areas have access to

lower, secondary and higher education, and thus a growing middle class has now emerged in the dalit community. As opportunities and chances of education have increased tremendously and aspirations rose, the dalits are becoming a stronger and stabler group in India in the upcoming decade, especially if they are able to elevate themselves over the hindrances of religion and language. The age-old tradition of caste discrimination still dominates the Indian scenario, not just among Hindus but among all the possible mainstream religions of the country, the chaturvarna which differentiates all Hindu castes, serves as the parameter of caste indifferences. Shudras occupy the basement of caste hierarchy, serious observation on the caste system of Hindus in India we can find a fifth category namely Ati shudras who are projected with much more indifference.

Rich in diversity on various grounds the country is also rich in caste discrimination. *Mahar, Chamars, Jatavs, Valmikis, Pasis, Dusadhs, Musahars, Bhangis, Khatiks, Madigas, Adi Dravidars, Arunthathiyars, Pallars, Paraiyars, Nadars* are some among the thousand dalit communities in the country. Dr B. R Ambedkar in his book "The Untouchables" comments on these dalits that "they are impure, they are impure while they live, they die the death of impure, and they give birth to children who are born with the stigma of untouchability. It is a case of permanent, hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse." What do they eat? is an interesting question to trace, as food is one among the basic needs of the human race. One obvious fact is that the so called outcaste or dalits eat less and worse. Only those who have achieved a valuable status in the country are eating better. Within the dalit castes, the kind of meat consumed in turn became the identity of the communities. Urmila Pawar, a prominent marathi novelist, in her autobiography "Aayadan", discloses the hardships faced by the Mahar community in Maharashtra, they were acknowledged as *mrutaharis*, which means the ones who eat meat and from Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography "Joothan", the oppressed groups

Valmikis in northern India can be seen to be acknowledged as consumers of joothan, which is the leftover of food by upper caste and even animals. The upper castes have prescribed food not only for themselves but also for other castes as well. The Joothan or the leftover food is regarded as the staple food for most of the dalits and untouchables. The distribution of livelihood resources has also pushed the dalits completely outside the sphere of public distribution. The untouchables only received various discarded resources, including the leftover food, cast off cloth and dead cattles and animals. The strong irony behind is that all the grains, fruits and vegetables are produced by these untouchables with hard labor but they are still denied essential food and are given coarse grains, grains and lentils cleaned out of cow dung, the leftover food, unwanted and torn clothes.

Dalit food and its politics refer to the intersection of caste, food practices, and social dynamics within the Dalit community in India. Food has long been an important aspect of caste-based discrimination and social exclusion in India. The traditional caste system enforces strict regulations on what people from different castes can eat and with whom they can share meals. Dalits have been traditionally assigned menial tasks such as cleaning, handling carcasses, and working with waste, which has led to their exclusion from the mainstream food system and the imposition of dietary restrictions on them. Dalit food practices have often been stigmatized and associated with impurity and pollution. They have been denied access to common water sources, prevented from entering food establishments, and faced discrimination in the preparation and sharing of food. As a result, Dalits have developed their own food practices and culinary traditions, which are seen as distinct from those of higher castes. Dalit food politics revolves around challenging these oppressive practices and reclaiming cultural and culinary identities. Activists and scholars have highlighted the significance of Dalit food practices as a means of resistance and empowerment.

They argue that embracing and celebrating Dalit food culture challenges the caste-based notions of purity and impurity and challenges the dominant narrative of the upper castes. Food festivals, cookbooks, and social media platforms have emerged as platforms to promote and popularize Dalit cuisine, elevating the visibility and dignity of Dalit food practices. These initiatives aim to challenge the social stigma associated with Dalit food, promote inclusivity, and foster cultural pride.

Moreover, the politics of Dalit food extends beyond culinary aspects. It encompasses broader issues of social justice, equality, and representation. It calls for addressing structural discrimination, advocating for land rights, access to education, and economic opportunities for Dalits. Dalit food and its politics highlight the complex relationship between caste, food, and social dynamics. It addresses the historical marginalization of Dalits within the food system and seeks to challenge discriminatory practices while promoting cultural pride and social justice. Dalit food refers to the cuisine of dalit communities in India. The types of food eaten by dalits vary depending on the region and community, but they generally reflect the socio-economic status and cultural practices of their communities. From the autobiographies of the dalit writers, Urmila Pawar and Bama we can find some common examples of types of dalit food:

- Millet-based dishes: Millet is a staple grain for many dalit communities, as it is affordable and easy to cultivate. Millet-based dishes such as ragi balls, jowar roti, and bajra khichdi are common in many parts of India.
- Lentil-based dishes: Dal or lentils are a major source of protein for dalit communities. Popular dal dishes include sambar, rasam, dal fry, and dal tadka.

- Wild greens and vegetables: Dalit communities often forage for wild greens and vegetables, which are a rich source of nutrients. Some examples include keerai (spinach), muringa (drumstick leaves), and vazhapoo (banana flower).
- Fish and seafood: In coastal areas, the communities rely on fish and seafood as a source of protein. Dried fish and shrimp are also commonly used to add flavor to dishes.
- Non-vegetarian dishes: While vegetarianism is often associated with Hinduism, many Dalits eat non-vegetarian dishes such as mutton, chicken, and eggs.

It's important to note that Dalit food is not a monolithic category, and the types of dishes vary widely depending on the region and community. Additionally, the availability of ingredients and access to cooking facilities also influence the types of food that are eaten.

In Bama's autobiography "Karukku", she writes about her experiences as a dalit woman in Tamil Nadu, India. Food is an important part of her narrative, as it reflects the social and cultural marginalization that dalits face. Throughout the book, Bama describes the food that dalits were allowed to eat, which was often limited to cheap, low-quality grains like ragi and jowar. Meat and dairy products were not part of their diet, as these were seen as luxuries that only upper-caste Hindus could afford. Bama writes about the humiliation and discrimination that dalits faced when it came to food. For example, they were not allowed to cook or eat in the presence of upper-caste people, and they had to use separate utensils and dishes. In many cases, they were not allowed to enter the kitchens of upper-caste households, and had to rely on their own community for food. Despite these restrictions, Bama celebrates the rich and diverse cuisine of dalit communities. She writes about the importance of foraging for wild greens, fruits, and roots, and the creative ways in which dalits made the most of their limited resources. For example, she describes how they would grind dried fish or shrimp into a powder

and mix it with their grains to add flavor and protein. Overall, Bama's "Karukku" is a powerful testimony to the resilience and creativity of dalit communities in the face of discrimination and marginalization. Through her writing, she highlights the importance of food as a marker of social identity, as well as a source of cultural pride and resistance.

Urmila Pawar's memoir "Aayadan" also sheds light on the food practices and habits of dalits in India. Like Bama's "Karukku," Pawar's work provides a first-hand account of the experiences of dalits in South Asia. In "Aaydan," Pawar writes about the poverty and hunger that were a constant reality for her dalit community. She describes how they were often forced to survive on meager portions of rice and dal, and how meat was considered a luxury that they could rarely afford. When they did have access to meat, it was usually in the form of cheap, low-quality cuts like liver and intestines. Pawar also writes about the stigma attached to dalit food practices. She describes how her community's food was often seen as impure and unclean by the dominant castes, who would refuse to eat with them or even touch their plates and utensils. As a result, dalits were often excluded from communal eating spaces and forced to eat separately. Despite these challenges, Pawar writes about how food also served as a source of pride and resistance for her community. She describes how dalits would come together to share food and celebrate festivals, and how they would often prepare special dishes and sweets as a way of asserting their cultural identity and dignity. "Aaydan" provides a powerful account of the dalit life in which food practices and habits are deeply intertwined with caste-based discrimination and exclusion in India. It also highlights the determination and creativity of dalits in the face of all the challenges, and their ability to find joy and pride in their own food traditions.

From these autobiographies more cases of food regarding the Paraiyar and Mahar gentries can be traced, the Paraiyar community substantially fed on rice( Kanji) and cooked it along with the cheapest fish they could get. Silebi kendai and paambu kendai are the names of the locally

available cheap fish consumed by the Paraiya community in the locale of Tamil Nadu. The Paraiya community is substantially growers who work in the fields of the upper caste, paraiya men would be working in the fields whereas women vended fruits, vegetables and worked as retainers at the houses of the landlords. They got fruits and vegetables consequently in seasons, like mangoes, cucumbers, sugar nightsticks, sweet potatoes, win shoots, grams, win saccharinity, jackfruits and so on. The Mahar community among the dalits infrequently ate good food, they substantially depended on coarse rice grains brought from portion shops, they frequently culinarians this rice and consumes it along with pithale, which is a cooked flour of beats called Kulit, occasionally they had bhakri made of milo, that is red jowar, this food item is indeed veritably rough, and considering the ocean food, due to inadequate sources of income, they substantially ate dried fish or small affordable fish, fried with onions, red chili paste and salt. Rice was the staple food item, special dishes like modak, puri were made from rice flour during times of carnivals. Most of the dalit groups in India eat plenitude during their times of holy events and expositions.

Other common dalit food in India includes Rakthi, a food item from western India made with scapegoat blood, oil painting, chili paste, onion and swab. The curdled blood is made into a racy and thick paste and is eaten with jolada or roti. Fish was an important part of the dalit diet, primarily the small fish that were gratuitous to fishers. In her autobiography, "Aayadan", Urmila Pawar says, "The rich stored the meat of sode( shrimps, prawns), tisrya( bones) or mule; poor people stored the water in which these fish were boiled. The stock was boiled till it came a thick- suchlike sauce and was also stored in bottles. This was called Kaat. " "Wajadi is another dish made from brushing the skin of the beast bowel, drawing the trash and adding salt and a little chili paste. Chutneys and pickles play a significant role in Dalit cuisine. They add a burst of flavor and tang to meals. Chutneys are made by grinding ingredients like coconut, peanuts, coriander, mint, or tomato, along with spices and seasonings.



Pickles are made by preserving fruits or vegetables in oil, vinegar, or brine, along with spices. Some popular Dalit chutneys include coconut chutney, peanut chutney, or mint chutney. Spices and constituents were infrequently affordable and accessible to the dalit community, so for them the food's flavor had to be uprooted through the stylish possible styles of cuisine. ” Rotis stand as the stylish side dish for the rejects, rotis are made in a different style from those made in upper caste homes," generally with a fermented dough of coarse ground wheat flour, mota anaj and curd, in some places indeed pea flour, it takes a long time to come soft enough to stretch and cut into circles. When the dough is ready, a portion of it's stretched over the arm and allowed to hang down. This drawn mass has to be transferred to the waxed, hotted face of an reversed earthen pot at just the right moment, and ignited. ” Yet another popular dish is the red ant chutney firstly from the megacity of Chhattisgarh, “ It's a pungent and racy paste made by crushing red ants and their eggs, eaten extensively at collaborative carnivals and in original dishes.” Jhunka is a dish native to the state of Maharashtra, often found in Dalit cuisine. It is made by cooking besan (gram flour) with spices, onions, and sometimes vegetables like green bell peppers. Jhunka has a thick and creamy consistency and is typically served with bhakri or rice. In the utmost corridor of the country a proper cookery for Dalits can not be set up. The times of Dalit carnivals and so on are the veritably many cases where dalits eat extravagantly, Food is therefore a true incarnation of culture, religion and identity especially for the dalits. Dalit food is privately linked to India's caste scale, which is a system of social position grounded on birth. Dalits, who are also known as " Untouchables or outcaste," are considered to be at the bottom of the scale and have historically been barred from numerous aspects of mainstream society, including access to food. Caste- grounded demarcation extends to the realm of food, with upper caste Hindus assessing salutary restrictions on dalits and controlling their access to certain types of food. For illustration, dalits were frequently interdicted from eating meat, as it was considered impure and contaminating. This meant that they had to

calculate on a limited diet of grains and vegetables, which were frequently of poor quality. Indeed within the realm of submissive food, Dalits were subordinated to discriminatory practices. They weren't allowed to cook or eat in the presence of upper caste people, and had to use separate implements and dishes. In numerous cases, they weren't allowed to enter the kitchens of upper caste homes, and had to depend on their own community for food. Despite these restrictions, dalits have developed a rich and different cookery that reflects their artistic heritage and adaptability in the face of oppression. numerous dalit dishes are grounded on affordable and fluently available constituents, similar as millets, lentils, and wild flora. Through their food, dalits have maintained a sense of community and artistic identity, indeed in the face of demarcation. The relationship between dalit food and the caste scale is complex and multifaceted, reflecting the broader social and political dynamics of Indian society. By understanding the ways in which food is intertwined with caste and hierarchy, one can gain a deeper appreciation for the artistic diversity and social complexity of India.

The food items on the plate become a representation of the position in the caste hierarchy, Brahmins occupy the top of the table with their consumption of vegetarian food. Non-beef eaters and non-vegetarians settle in the middle of the hierarchy and meat eaters including beef, pork, chicken occupy the absolute bottom position in the hierarchy. Upper caste never insisted on feeding beef and pork, especially the intestinal and digestive parts of animals, which in turn reached the dalits, who later developed taste and nutrition in it. The Brahmin architecture has established vegetarians as the noble of all beings. Hinduism recommends abstaining from eating meat as the act of abstaining carries spiritual results. In the Hindu epic "The Mahabharata", Bhishma tells Yudhishtira that "a person who eats non-vegetarian food does go to hell." And according to Manu, the Hindu Law giver, "meat which is sanctified with mantras (prayers) and properly prepared, according to the values and rules of the Vedas, in rituals performed in honor of the ancestors, is pure." All other meat falls under the category

which is obtained by useless slaughter or unwanted killing , and is, therefore, not edible, and leads the consumer to Hell and ruins. This age-old framework itself established the dalit community to feed on meat and dead so as to consider them as an inferior section.

Traditionally, dalits have been restricted to eating only certain types of food that were considered "low" or "impure," such as grains, lentils, and vegetables. They were not allowed to eat meat or dairy products, as these were considered to be associated with higher castes and were seen as polluting for dalits. However, over time, dalits have begun to challenge these restrictions and assert their right to eat what they choose. Many dalits have started to consume meat and dairy products as a way of asserting their independence and challenging the caste-based restrictions that have been placed on them. There are also movements within the dalit community to reclaim traditional foods and culinary practices that have been lost as a result of discrimination and marginalization. For example, some dalits are working to revive traditional dalit cuisine, which is based on local, seasonal ingredients and emphasizes the use of medicinal herbs and spices. Overall, the issue of dalits and their food is a complex and multifaceted one, reflecting the broader social and cultural dynamics of caste-based discrimination and exclusion in India. Food is not merely sustenance; it is intertwined with culture, identity, and history. In India, the concept of food carries significant social and caste-based connotations. However, the culinary traditions of the Dalit community offer a lens through which we can explore their resilience, cultural heritage, and ongoing struggle for empowerment. Despite these constraints , Dalit food has evolved as a symbol of resilience and identity. Dalit cuisine celebrates the resourcefulness of the community, showcasing inventive methods of transforming humble ingredients into flavorful dishes. For instance, the chutneys and pickles made from locally available vegetables, wild greens, and herbs exemplify the innovative use of ingredients. These recipes have been passed down through generations, forming a culinary legacy that affirms Dalit identity and heritage.

In recent years, Dalit food has become a medium of resistance, fostering social transformation and empowerment. Several individuals and organizations have recognized the cultural and economic potential of Dalit cuisine, leading to the establishment of Dalit-owned restaurants and food businesses. These ventures not only provide economic opportunities for the community but also challenge caste-based prejudices and stereotypes associated with Dalit food. Through these enterprises, Dalit chefs and entrepreneurs have taken center stage, reclaiming their culinary traditions and challenging social norms. They have created spaces where Dalit food is celebrated, allowing people from all backgrounds to savor the unique flavors and appreciate the cultural significance behind these dishes. By breaking barriers and opening dialogues, Dalit food has emerged as a powerful tool for social change. Efforts are underway to preserve and document Dalit culinary traditions. Many organizations are working tirelessly to collect and record traditional recipes, ensuring their preservation for future generations. These initiatives not only safeguard the culinary heritage but also empower Dalit communities by recognizing their contributions to the gastronomic landscape of India.

Moreover, social media platforms and digital spaces have provided a global platform for Dalit food enthusiasts to share recipes, stories, and experiences. The dissemination of Dalit food culture through these channels has not only created a sense of pride and solidarity within the community but has also attracted wide attention and appreciation. Dalit food in contemporary India represents more than just a culinary tradition. It is a testament to the resilience, strength, and creativity of a marginalized community that has overcome centuries of oppression. Through their culinary heritage, Dalits have carved a path to empowerment, challenging stereotypes, and reclaiming their rightful place in society. As we celebrate the diversity of Indian cuisine, it is crucial to recognize and honor the contributions of Dalit food, ensuring its preservation and continued appreciation as a vital part of India's cultural fabric

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