



## Food, Caste, and Everyday Life: Reading Culinary Narratives in Contemporary Dalit Literature

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### Abstract

This paper examines the intersections of food, caste, and everyday life in contemporary Dalit literature by analyzing culinary narratives as sites of both oppression and resistance. Drawing on Shahu Patole's *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*, Bama's *Karukku*, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, and Hira Bansode's poem *Bosom Friend*, the study explores how food functions as a powerful cultural marker that reveals deeply ingrained structures of caste discrimination. In these texts, food is not merely a material necessity but a symbolic tool that encodes purity, pollution and social hierarchy. While Dalit bodies are controlled through food taboos and restrictions, culinary experiences also emerge as moments of self-assertion, dignity, and communal solidarity.

The paper argues that representations of Dalit kitchens and culinary labour complicate mainstream narratives of Indian food culture, which often overlook caste-based exclusions. Patole's book functions as a cultural archive of Dalit food histories, foregrounding everyday culinary practices as social evidence of caste-based exclusion. Bama's recollections of food-related humiliation reveal how caste intrudes into intimate spheres of domesticity and consumption. Valmiki's accounts of segregated dining spaces and denied access further underscore the violence embedded in routine acts of eating. Bansode's *Bosom Friend* disrupts the romanticized idea that sharing a meal naturally dissolves caste boundaries, exposing how prejudice resurfaces through comments on taste, etiquette, and expectation, even within social settings marked by assumed equality.

The works demonstrate that food operates as a critical archive of Dalit lived experience, revealing the subtle and explicit violences of everyday life while simultaneously enabling assertions of memory, cultural identity, and resistance.

**Keywords:** Dalit literature, culinary practices, caste discrimination, *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*, *Karukku*, *Joothan*, *Bosom friend*.

Food, caste, and everyday life form a deeply entangled triad in Dalit literature, where culinary practices become vivid sites of structural oppression and subaltern resistance. In texts such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life*, Bama's *Karukku*, Shahu Patole's *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*, and the poem *Bosom Friend* by Hira Bansode, food is more than mere sustenance - it carries the symbolic weight of purity and pollution, the trauma of exclusion, and the affirmation of identity. The lived experience of Dalit communities -manifested through what is cooked, what is eaten, and how it is shared - becomes a political archive, revealing how caste is inscribed not only in social institutions but in the bodies and plates of the marginalized.

Valmiki's *Joothan* is perhaps the paradigmatic text in this regard, since it gives its name to the concept of 'joothan' - leftover food, considered ritually impure, which Dalits are forced to eat. This consumption of polluted scraps becomes "a central and systemic mechanism of caste-based violence, humiliation, and dehumanization" (Pradhan, Das, and Sahoo 5882). In their analysis, food and commensality become instruments through which upper castes assert dominance and reinforce social hierarchy. What Valmiki narrates is not poverty, but a ritualized mechanism of exclusion: joothan is not just food, but a material embodiment of caste stigma.

Simultaneously, food also emerges in Dalit writings as a source of resistance. In *Joothan*, the moments when Valmiki refuses joothan or reflects on preparing his own food are deeply political - they reclaim bodily autonomy in a system that denies it. Such refusals are pivotal: "acts of refusal-rejecting the polluted scraps-and the autonomous preparation of food become pivotal moments of resistance and the reclamation of Dalit dignity" (Pradhan, Das, and Sahoo 5884).

Bama's *Karukku*, brings a gendered dimension to this discourse. Her memoir

recounts how caste hierarchies shaped domestic and religious spaces, including food practices. Bama's writing often describes how Dalit women served food in their households under surveillance, how they carried food in ways that preserved social distance, and how their food labor was constantly policed by caste norms. Dalit women's cuisine is both "stigmatized and degraded in the so-called mainstream food culture" and that their food writing "translates the conflicting visions and experiences of food ... into literary writings" (Gopani 2). Here, cooking is not a passive domestic activity but a lived testimony: Bama's retelling of food related humiliation reveals how structural forms of caste and gender violence converge in the kitchen.

Shahu Patole's *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* brings food history, memory, and ethnography into one powerful narrative. In an interview with *Down to Earth*, Patole declares, "our kitchens, our food, have been neglected ... we also eat ... but our food culture is never recognized" (Patole qtd. in Anand). He frames his work as an urgent archive for future generations: "if our future generations ever wonder what their forefathers ate, this documentation will be invaluable to them" (Patole qtd. in Anand). He critiques the dominant culinary canon for focusing on foods like puran poli and poha - staples of the upper castes -while ignoring what Dalit communities, particularly the Mahar and Mang in Marathwada, have traditionally eaten (Patole qtd. in *The Week*). In Patole's account, the Dalit plate was historically devoid of ghee, oil, and milk; such scarcity was not accidental but a consequence of caste-based deprivation (Patole qtd. in *The Week*).

Patole does not just document recipes; he interrogates the caste-based categorization of food rooted in scriptures. In *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*, he contests conventional dietary hierarchies, showing how Dalit foodways were labeled 'tamasic' (sinful or impure) by dominant caste ideologies. Patole's narrative "provides a

compelling counter-history to Brahmanical food norms" (Sophan 493). Patole's work thus becomes a site of political and cultural reclamation, where forgotten culinary practices are revived and revalued. By foregrounding ingredients such as millets, foraged greens, and inexpensive cuts of meat, he demonstrates how nutritional value and cultural meaning have long been obscured by ritualist prejudice.

The ethnographic attention Patole pays to everyday cooks, especially Dalit women, restores agency to those historically denied authorship over cultural knowledge. Moreover, Patole challenges the very epistemic structures that equate purity with hierarchy, revealing how culinary exclusions map onto broader regimes of social control. In doing so, he frames Dalit food narratives not as marginal curiosities but as critical archives of resilience, community, and ecological intimacy. The politics of food in Dalit literature is not just confined to memoir or ethnography; it also resonates in poetry.

Hira Bansode's *Bosom Friend* uses the metaphor of shared food to critique caste prejudice in interpersonal relationships. The poem evokes Shabari from the *Ramayana*, who offers fruit tasted by herself to Rama with pure devotion-yet, when the upper-caste friend tastes the Dalit speaker's food, she questions the taste and serving, revealing deep-seated caste bias. This interaction encapsulates a persistent truth in caste politics: even when meals are shared, the caste divide remains. The elegant simplicity of Bansode's imagery underscores that caste is not erased by intimacy; it is re-inscribed through manners, taste, and moral judgment. Through this subtle yet incisive portrayal, Bansode exposes how caste operates not only through explicit exclusion but through the everyday micro-practices of consumption and etiquette. The poem thus transforms an ordinary act of eating into a powerful critique of the socializing force of caste ideology.

Dalit food practices also function as acts of resistance and identity-formation.

Chandraiah Gopani, in *Writing Food: Understanding Suffering and Resistance Through Food in Dalit Writings*, argues that food culture in Dalit literature is "both suffering and resistance" (Gopani 1). He shows how religious norms legitimize hierarchies of food - upper caste diets are valorized as civilized, whereas Dalit cuisines are dismissed as "unclean" (Gopani 2). By foregrounding Dalit culinary traditions in their writings, Dalit authors challenge these notions and assert dignity. Gopani also highlights that modern platforms - cookbooks, social media, food festivals - are being used to reclaim Dalit food culture, thereby transforming private culinary practices into public political statements (Gopani 10).

Dalit commensality also functions within systems of caste violence. Scholars argue that in *Joothan*, "food and commensality operate as a primary site for the performance of upper-caste power and the enforcement of a rigid social hierarchy" (Pradhan, Das, and Sahoo 5883). Valmiki's refusal of *joothan* and his turn toward self-provisioning becomes a mode of resistance and self-fashioning (Pradhan, Das, and Sahoo 5884). His rejection of leftover food is not merely a personal assertion of dignity but a symbolic rupture with a history of imposed degradation.

The act of refusing to accept polluted remnants destabilizes the ideological foundations that legitimize Dalit subordination. Moreover, by reconstructing his identity through labor, education, and self-sufficiency, Valmiki reclaims agency over the very domain—food—that had been used to mark him as impure. In this sense, commensality in *Joothan* becomes a critical battlefield where the politics of humiliation is countered by the politics of self-respect and ethical autonomy.

Patole has often emphasized the importance of reviving the idea of subaltern food memory. In a conversation with *The Week*, he lamented that "much is written about the food of Marathwada, but our food is missing ... they write about puran poli and poha, but that's

not a Dalit's food" (Patole qtd. in *The Week*). His critique of "violent vegetarianism" - the romanticization of sattvic diets by dominant castes - underscores how caste ideology has weaponized diet to draw moral and social boundaries (Patole qtd. in *The Week*). Patole's statement, "even to this day, I don't like the smell of ghee ... instead of ghee, we use animal fat," not only conveys his personal experience but also gestures toward how tradition and caste history shape taste (Patole qtd. in *The Week*).

Culinary resistance in Dalit literature is not nostalgic or purely symbolic: it is a deliberate politics of memory, identity, and survival. Dalit kitchens, in Patole's account, function as living archives where recipes are testimonies and meals are acts of defiance. In Valmiki's writing, the bodily humiliation of eating joothan is resisted through refusal and self-production. In Bama's work, the kitchen becomes a gendered space of both subjugation and assertion, while Bansode's poetry unpacks the deep emotional and moral fissures that caste leaves in shared spaces of intimacy.

Theoretically, these texts invite us to read food through Mary Douglas's categories of purity and pollution, as well as through James C. Scott's concept of 'everyday resistance.' Dalit culinary practices - cooking offal, sharing meat, rejecting leftovers - may not always appear as grand political gestures, but they are profoundly subversive in a system that has long controlled Dalit bodies through notions of impurity. These acts are mundane yet radical: they reclaim agency in a system that denies it and assert that Dalit bodies deserve nourishment, dignity, and self-determination.

Building on these frameworks, Dalit food narratives also compel a rethinking of what Pierre Bourdieu terms the 'social distinctions' encoded in taste. In a caste-driven food economy, taste is never neutral; it is shaped by centuries of ritual hierarchy and material deprivation. By foregrounding foods

historically stigmatized as coarse, polluting, or improper, Dalit writers expose the ideological work behind such classifications and unsettle the Brahmanical monopoly over what counts as refined or pure. These culinary assertions function as counter-hegemonic practices that destabilize dominant aesthetics and establish an alternative cultural capital rooted in survival, resilience, and collective memory. In reclaiming the sensory realm-taste, smell, texture- Dalit texts articulate a politics of embodiment that challenges caste not only as a social structure but as a regime that governs the very pleasures and possibilities of being human.

The interwoven narratives of Valmiki, Bama, Patole, and Bansode show that food is not a peripheral motif in Dalit literature: it is central to understanding how caste operates in the most intimate domains of daily life. Culinary narratives articulate the violence of exclusion, the trauma of devaluation, and the strength of resistance. By documenting, remembering, and reshaping what is cooked, eaten, and shared, Dalit writers transform the kitchen - a site of labor, nourishment, and history - into a political terrain. In doing so, they challenge dominant cultural canons, reclaim their culinary heritage, and affirm the right to identity, and belonging. Food becomes both wound and weapon: a medium for truth-telling, a tool of transformation, and a space in which a more just future may be imagined.

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