

At Margins of the Plate: Food Exclusion and Resistance in Dalit Communities

Devalina Bhattacharya*

Submitted: 27.02.2026

Revised: 26.05.2026

Accepted: 30.06.2026

Abstract: Food has been the manifestation of many nostalgic cultural moments for many decades. The Roshogolla debate has ignited the passions of both Bengalis and Odias alike, while Pav-Bhaaji has become an image of Mumbai's palate. But not everyone gets an equal place at the plate. The caste system has played a role in deciding the palate of the Indian mainstream, with foods of the Dalits quietly disappearing. This paper seeks to investigate the connection between food practices and the caste system and social exclusion, particularly in relation to the Dalit communities of India. Using Textual and narrative analysis to study the experiences of the 'lower castes', this paper examines how food habits serve both as instruments of marginalisation and resistance. Using the Gastro-politics framework developed by Arjun Appadurai to showcase how acts of sharing and refusal of transaction of food develop in promoting systemic inequalities and caste hierarchies through purity culture. This paper would study the socio-political ramifications of food in the caste system through theories of stigmatisation and deprivation, especially focusing on the accounts by Omprakash Valmiki's "Joothan", Shahu Patole's "Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada" and "Imagining an Anti-caste Utopia Through Food: Dalit Student Politics in Hyderabad, India" by Garalyte. The findings of the paper underscore the necessity of recognising the role of food as a critical site of marginalisation and transformative actions by the marginalised communities, adding to the literature of food as identity, resistance and justice.

Key Words: Food, Caste, Dalit, Resistance, Purity.

*Ph.D. Scholar, Dept. of Political Science, Diamond Harbour Women's University, W.B.
e-mail: databoxdevalina@gmail.com

Introduction

“Some communities and groups that have been historically excluded for decades and continue to be excluded even today, based on their culinary habits.”¹ This paper argues that exclusion goes beyond economic, social and political towards alienation and marginalisation, crucially through culinary endeavours. At the core, this paper examines how food has been attached to practices in which caste-based hierarchies are both enforced and resisted. Food functions to portray the everyday struggles of Dalit communities, where the act of sharing, giving and refusing food gains political meanings for Dalit individuals. Food has always been a sign of gastronomical difference. All the celebrations of India come in varying forms of food, and one’s caste is often showcased in one’s food. Food apartheid ties shame and difference to food: from meat sold in hidden lanes in old cities of Hyderabad to the customs of not sharing plates with other castes. But this is not just a question of non-vegetarianism or a meat-based diet. “Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia” by Arjun Appadurai explores the symbolic, socio-political role of food in Hindu South Asian culture within the Tamil Brahmin community of South India. Appadurai introduces the concept of “gastro-politics,” defined as conflict or competition over cultural or economic resources expressed through food-related social transactions.²

Literature Review

Shahu Patole, in his work ‘Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada’, opined that mainstream gastronomy is constructed around upper castes, accompanied by the erasure of Dalit cuisine. He highlights that Dalit foodways—such as reliance on jowar over wheat, and the use of leftover or less-valued foods—reflect not merely deprivation but enforced exclusion and economic marginality. Om Prakash Valmiki’s memoir “Joothan” is a critical portrayal of food as a locus of humiliation and agency. It portrays the ritual subordination of the upper castes by accepting leftovers, making its rejection a move of political resistance. Arjun Appadurai, particularly in his influential essay “Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia,” theorises food as a powerful semiotic device that encodes social hierarchy, purity, and exclusion. Dalit protests against discriminatory food practices are embedded in broader struggles for equality and dignity. The ethnographic accounts from all three texts showcase how food practices and discriminatory practices in temples, festivals and marriages are based on enacted caste status, making food part of everyday political struggle. Kristina Garalyte’s research, “Imagining an Anti-caste Utopia Through Food: Dalit Student Politics in Hyderabad”, on Dalit student politics, takes the analysis further by showing how food becomes a site of contemporary contestation. These works highlight how the stigmatisation of meat-eating (especially beef) has been instrumental in Dalit exclusion, while also noting how such boundaries are historically contingent and politically constructed. Hence, the present literature provides a mutually constructive relation between food and caste structure, but to an extent fails to synthesise certain facets of this debate. This work tries to bridge this gap.

Research Objectives

1. To critically examine how caste-based food practices enforce and reproduce social boundaries in India, drawing on both literary and ethnographic sources.

2. To analyse how food becomes a site of both marginalisation and resistance for Dalit communities, focusing on everyday practices, symbolic acts, and collective identities.
 3. To employ food as a lens and metaphor for understanding the intersections of caste, power, and identity in Indian society and politics.
 4. To address gaps in existing literature by foregrounding the lived experiences and cultural expressions of Dalit foodways, and assessing their representation in the discourse.
- Therefore, through these objectives, this paper looks at how caste mediates food relations to arrive at a nuanced understanding of the voices of the marginalised in this debate.

Research Questions

1. How do food practices intersect with caste-based labour and the pursuit of social justice in Indian society?
2. In what ways do food habits reinforce or challenge notions of caste purity?
3. What is the relationship between taste, culinary preferences, and experiences of deprivation among Dalit communities?
4. How does food memory manifest in literature, and what role does it play in shaping narratives of caste and identity?

Research Methodology

This paper will use qualitative research methodologies: thematic and narrative analysis to analyse works discussing the intersection of food and caste and the socio-economic dimensions surrounding it. This paper looks at personal accounts in the form of autobiographical and semi-autobiographical texts like *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* by Shahu Patole, *Jhoothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, as well as secondary research like that of “Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia” by Arjun Appadurai, and “Imagining an Anti-caste Utopia Through Food: Dalit Student Politics in Hyderabad, India” by Kristina Garalyte.

Discussion

Labour and Justice

According to the Forbes Billionaire ranking for 2022-23, 90% of wealth is held by the upper castes, with scheduled castes accounting for only 2.6%.³ The intersection of caste and religion shows many statistics of intergroup inequality in wealth, and this lack often translates to accepting degrading work for survival in the Dalit community. Caste is often not understood in a materialistic sense, leaving a gap in understanding the daily choices of Dalits. For example, Dalit women in rural Maharashtra walked for miles to provide water for landlords or worked around the houses at dawn to earn only scraps of prepared food. A ritualised exchange that trades her physical effort for stale rice and leftover vegetables.

‘Joothan’, as written by Om Prakash Valmiki, has shown that food is not only a method of communication but also of resistance. Valmiki illustrates a kind of structural ritualistic humiliation and violence that always kind of forces Dalit identities to be suppressed and removed from the mainstream dominant food. Therefore, this paper would like to study and try to analyse how methods of resistance have been developed through the idea of sharing both their own stories and food cultures as parts of their identities.

An incident inspires Valmiki to oppose this system and to kindle a fire of resistance within his soul through a small act of rebellion by his mother. When an upper-caste man, Tyagi, humiliated his mother, she threw away his jhootan. She refused to accept the humiliation in exchange for accepting food. She refused to bind herself to the chains of her caste identity and what it demands of her to keep her place in society. To establish his own form of political activism, he always based it on refusing to accept any jhootan or scraps, thus connecting the personal to a collective form of resistance. Though begging by nature is not directly tied to caste, many Dalits or people of lower caste would be first to get scraps from those of the upper castes.⁴ This is not just mentioned in 'Jhootan' but also in Patole. We see Dalits undertaking small tasks of manual labour around the house just to receive scraps of food, or even beg for some part of the food or water from the upper castes⁵. The upper castes would make a point of their own charitable nature in helping the Dalits. This guise revealed the deeply unjust system at work. Patole tries to bring Dalit food to the front. He accepts that the dishes were not always a labour of delicacy or taste, but rather a means of survival. This shows how hard the lives of Dalits were. Their food culture depended on how hard they had to work to provide labour for the upper castes. This directly supports the paper's argument about food exclusion as a mechanism of social oppression.

"Festivals had a special place of respect for the Mang communities. In Dhawara, organised during the bringing of Jowar from home, Mangs had a special role to play."⁶ Often during the process, the bullocks would defecate, and it was the work of the worker to catch the faeces with their hands and, if spoiled, to clean the grains. "When the threshed grains piled up, the morva would be filled with these fresh grains. It was considered auspicious to fill it up and let a Mang worker lift it first. This ritual was called pendha bharne. The Mang workers would shout, 'Mhasubacha chang bhal (praise the Lord Mhasoba)!' Only after this was the grain harvest carried home."⁷ This showed a kind of symbolic respect to the Mangs for their labour. This suggests a kind of reciprocity which is not considered a part of the caste system. While this ritual conveys symbolic respect for the Mang's labour, a closer analytical reading reveals that these practices preserve rather than challenge the established caste-based hierarchies. The recognition did not translate to any socio-economic improvement for the Mangs. But these small acts were only platitudes to keep the lower castes complacent. The reality may be somewhere between a kind of beneficial relationship of labour and the thought of philanthropy of the upper caste.

The text provides an ethnographic account of the historical relationship between the Mahar and Mang communities and landlord households in rural Maharashtra. Traditionally, members of these Dalit castes performed essential but menial labour for the landlords, such as cleaning, maintenance, and livestock care. Compensation for these services was rarely monetary; instead, they received leftover food, much of which was stale or of poor quality. The acceptance of such food, accompanied by ritualistic gestures of gratitude, underscores both the resilience and the social subordination of these communities. The practices described reveal the deeply entrenched caste-based hierarchies and the persistence of social and economic marginalisation endured by Dalits in the region. This narrative situates food practices within a

broader context of caste oppression, highlighting the intersection of caste-labour, sustenance, and dignity.

Caste, Purity and Savagery

As Ambedkar stated in 'Annihilation of Caste', caste often tries to practise ritualistic endogamy. It is not only seen in the social occupation and social actions of the individuals themselves, but also in the food practices as seen from writings like 'Dalits Kitchens of Marathawada'. Here we see practices like vegetarianism being an almost important part of being Hindu, but at the same time, even during the olden times, Dalits were never advised or forced to convert to vegetarianism, as this did not suit the upper castes.⁸ They needed a community that could do all the menial labour they considered too impure. Thus, it was to their benefit that Dalits ate meat such as buffalo or cow.

This raises a question: why do upper-caste groups now promote an ideology of "satvik purity" when historically it was convenient to sanction Dalit meat eating? Is the contemporary emphasis on dietary purity a consistent moral stance, or is it a flexible political tool used to reinforce caste boundaries of the present times? It is again a kind of cultural dominance that is reflected in the attitude of higher castes when they try to post about vegetarian identity and force it as natural to coerce 'others' to follow it.

Here, we find a very umbilical relationship between vegetarianism and casteism in India, and we often see marginal identities try to reassociate the negative qualities given to them. In Patole, we visualise a tendency of redlining of food culture with thorough research on the topic. Valmiki tries to disparage the custom of accepting Joothan as a stance against discriminatory purity culture. At the end of the song Beef Anthem which was an anthem by the Dalit student activist NS Chamar in Hyderabad against the suppression of their nature, the author tries to redefine and reassign the meaning of the food practices and lifestyles of Dalits. The impure, lazy and evil lower castes transform into brave, brilliant and strong images as noted by the author of the research, Kristina Garalyte, in the 'Imagining an Anti-caste Utopia Through Food: Dalit Student Politics in Hyderabad, India'. "If caste hierarchy and caste identities are intimately related to food practices, then the dominance of certain castes corresponds to the dominance of certain food habits or food cultures. It results in naming what is normal and what is not, what is acceptable and what should be denounced and banned."⁹ The imposition of upper-caste vegetarian habit supremacy in the campus canteen was more of a source of controversy for the marginalised students in these universities than the lack of meat. Studies have demonstrated how some food customs, such as vegetarianism and the taboo against eating beef, are used to uphold the social superiority and cultural "purity" of the dominant groups, stigmatising those with different eating habits, whether they belong to indigenous communities, "lower" castes, or religious minorities. Therefore, integrating these perspectives, this paper contends, it is not surprising that the conflict between beef as a meat or cow as a sacred Hindu symbol arrived as props in discussions of food, caste hierarchy and social order.

"Louis Dumont reaffirmed this understanding by stating that beef eaters and leather workers constituted the lowest ranks of the Indian caste hierarchy."¹⁰ But Beef Anthem by

Garalyte takes a different stance. "We were born with beef, Chamars, Madigas", NS Chamar told me during an interview, thus proudly declaring that beef constitutes the habitus of his community."¹¹ This line itself, Garalyte maintains, seeks to triumph over the repulsion associated with beef as a form of pride in ethnic identities. This is a way the marginalised try to redefine the stereotypes and attributes associated with their caste.

The case of vegetarianism or non-vegetarianism does not just take the form of a no-killing stance, but it is intertwined with the fabric of the Hindu religion. Thus, only gods which require sacrifice- the people of that region, especially the Brahmins, eat meat. The Bengali Brahmins are famous for not following vegetarianism; they follow simple days of rituals, which require a vegetarian diet. This dichotomy creates differences not only in food habits but also in behaviours. Whereas Bengalis are met with derision and advice of conversion, Dalits are met with clear discrimination. Often, they are not even allowed to draw water from the common wells, or their kitchen windows are forced shut.

Though the labour of the Dalits in fields, around the houses, helped in maintaining the lifestyle of the upper castes, they were still thought to be greatly impure. This feeling of impurity was often justified in two ways, according to Patole.¹² First, according to the Hindu scriptures, one's birth was a result of the deeds of one's past lives. Hence, it is only through the penance of a hard life that Dalits would be free of the sins of their past. This justified the exploitation and dehumanisation of the Dalits. As Dr B.R. Ambedkar asserts in 'Annihilation of Caste', the Hindu religion does not recognise the right of the individual to challenge the authority of the scriptures. This scriptural argument is often invoked to justify the continued subjugation and suffering of Dalits, treating collective caste discrimination as the logical outcome of 'Karma.' Secondly, the Dalits were considered dirty or impure in their lifestyle. They were thought to be more unhygienic and gorged of the forbidden meats. Both of these were considered personal offences of the untouchables, and hence they remained so.

Dalits, on the other hand, often had their own reasons. They were not allowed to use the wells or ponds of the common spaces. It is only when a person of a higher caste poured them water without touching their barrels, then they got that water. The higher castes often thought of it as a good deed for the day, while the Dalits, on the other hand, were begging for their human rights. This water, preciously drawn, would be judiciously used first for drinking and cooking, and bathing came at a later priority. Another instance of water discrimination or water inequity was the habitats based on the placement of the river. The Brahmins and other uppercastes lived in the upstreams with flowing clean water; the Dalits lived at the very bottom with faeces and other impurities. They often had to create makeshift sieves to access cleaner water. In places where water bodies were far off, it was the lower castes who brought water to the houses of the upper castes in pouches. But rarely water reached in huge quantities in their own houses.¹³

The eating of the forbidden meat came from both a necessity and a birthright. It is the right of the Mangs to take care of the dead cattle, says Patole. Cattle are pure when alive, but turn impure, *ashudh* after death¹⁴. Hence, Mangs had the right to eat the meat, whereas the skin was kept by the owner of the cattle. Meat or even non-veg has always been a food of

special times and availability. The meat sacrificed to the deity is considered *prasad*. But not all performed sacrifices; it all depends on the purpose and the subject of the offering. Often, the sacrifices and the times of *puja* were the only places where meat eating was done. This is not to say non-vegetarianism is unique now. Many different groups eat meat or fish to varying degrees. Their own geographical location and especially their caste judged their diet.

Relationship language is often infused with certain stigmas¹⁵. According to Goffman, stigma can turn a highly normal self into a tainted one with certain unique attributes and stereotypes.¹⁶ This difference in the structure of identity between how they see themselves and how they are can be seen among the caste relations between the so-called impure Dalits and the pure upper castes. This showed in the way the identities of Dalits are distorted, so they turn them into something tainted. This showed in the attitudes of the upper caste. For example, it was considered inauspicious to see the face of a Mang woman; hence, they finished their work early in the morning at the landlord's house. Thus, certain characters are assigned a negative character. These unfavourable traits therefore create a division and stigmatisation.

Defining Taste Through Deprivation

Dalit cuisines remain under-documented in scholarly food studies, creating a significant research gap within Indian culinary discourse. Indian food often becomes trapped in the cycle of endless naan and butter chicken to outsiders. Even counterarguments come only in the form of other upper-caste staples. Often, when we think of the diversity of food, we think of what came on the plate of the upper caste. The *puran polis* or *asafoetida* never considered where the Dalit taste bud lay. This gives a newer gap in research; the gastronomical experiences of the Dalits are, as usual, like many other issues, simply omitted.¹⁷ Dalits have historically been excluded not just from the table, but from cultural recognition itself. Thus, what Dalits eat was not a concern for the longest time; it was only with the rising feeling of acceptance of Dalit literature that the differences could be considered. The resistance of Dalit voices came with trying to bring their food to the foreground. The food became a metaphor for the visualisation of not only the struggles but also the differences in culture. In this context, food functions as a metaphor of not only social and economic struggles, but also food marginalisation. This paper tries to offer space for contesting and reasserting identity and power through food.

Runciman's work, "Relative Deprivation and Social Justice"¹⁸, bases the main argument on the fact that relative deprivation is subjective to an individual's reference group, in contrast to absolute deprivation, which is directly related to a lack of resources for survival. Fraternalistic deprivation occurs when a group feels collectively less fortunate than other groups. This is the case for the Dalits, who see themselves debased in the debate of both the economic and cultural parts of society. So their part in gastro-politics also notes their deprivation and discrimination, both in visibility and representation in food debates. The Jajmani system of dividing grains according to caste lines shows dominance and work relations between the 'masters' and generally lower caste workers. This is the cause of contention and resistance for many millennia, as seen in the story of protests occurring at Sri Parthasarathi Swami Temple. Their struggle reflects the broader tension between caste hierarchy and the ideal of equality in Hindu social thought.¹⁹

Such differences often show the hidden struggles and circumstances of living as a lower caste. The wedding of Dalits, for example, in Maharashtra differs from that of a Marathi upper caste in a number of ways. Instead of rice, they use jowar and turmeric as confetti. Such a difference shows the conditions derived from their socio-economic position, being unable to afford rice. Even in spices, according to Patole, Dalits rarely ate asafetida or added sweetness to their savoury dishes. They thought asafetida caused great flatulence and sexual impotency. Hence, often joked about the use of such expensive ingredients in high-caste food. The Dalits were never permitted to know the recipes or ingredients of the upper castes in great detail. They often only tasted stale leftovers, barring the days of the festivals.²⁰ Thus, wanting to show these differences showcases how the deprivation of the Dalits from the mainstream understanding has made knowledge about their food culture rare. Patole started his book with an anecdote about how the various recipes that his own family cooked were never represented in the food recipes of books and television. In examining how deprivation and the attribution of food values permeate not only the broader society but also stratifications within Dalit communities, this paper has illuminated the complex interplay between food practices and lived experiences of deprivation. Synthesising these insights, the final section demonstrates how the everyday realities and food-related memories discussed throughout the paper collectively underscore the significance of resistance, agency, and the persistent quest for dignity among the Dalit communities.

Food Memory and Literature

The Kaaran puja²¹ of the Mahars was sponsored by the uppercastes even though they did not have the prasad. This can be interpreted as the guilt of the upper castes disguised as generosity. As this particular puja was health-related and they were witness to the sufferings of the Mahars due to several diseases and epidemics, they sponsored this puja to benefit them. Many Brahmins did not always want to perform all the rituals for the Mangs or the Mahars; for example, they were not keen on marrying off Mangs and Mahars, but they were compelled to do so, to maintain their own caste relations. This shows the maintenance of the endogamy within the caste system, how the caste system exists and dictates the behaviour of the members of their own caste.

There are various festivals in society that connect nature with happiness and the sufferings of the Mang communities. From the celebration of Kaaran, the sacrifice of male buffaloes and indoctrinating children to Potarajs (kind of troops which perform spiritual practices), the many traditions of the mangs are thought to be different and hence unimportant for mainstream literature. All these traditions, rituals, and folklore are dying out. But these indigenous expressions are not getting highlighted, especially in the literature of the upper-caste elites. This shows that the myths and stories of the lower castes are not read as real literature; instead, pre-Vedic, Puranic and even Vedic literature are enjoyed by the so-called mainstream.

The animals that were considered useful for the castes were not consumed by the members. For example, the Mangs were forbidden from eating horsemeat, but they could eat pigs. On the other hand, the Mahars hated pigs or pork and did not consume them. The Mangs were

generally appointed as stable hands, so they could not eat horse meat due to their affinity for horses.

Conclusion

In examining labour, purity, deprivation and memory attributes value to food, permeating into broader society. The stratification, of which has been discussed in the paper. This paper tries to highlight through various ethnographic experiences how food has been a site for negotiating identity and social status. The simple instance of making food a site of survival (Patole) or resistance (Valmiki), this paper tries to reinforce the resistance, agency and quest for dignity among the Dalit communities. Thus, the anecdotes of Mangs from Patole or the student politics in Hyderabad do not serve as personal stories but as providing a locus to see food as both an instrument of oppression and a medium of resistance.

References:

1. Smith, Shona, and Balakrishnan, K, (2021). The Food Façade: The Politics Behind the Indian Food Habits and the Culinary Exclusion of the Adivasis from the Mainstream, *Journal of Xi'an Shiyu University Natural Science Edition*, Vol. 17 (7), pp. 36-42.
2. Appadurai, Arjun, (1981). Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 8 (3), pp. 494-511
3. Bharti, N.K., Chancel, L., Piketty, T. and Somanchi, A. (2024). Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj, *World Inequality Lab, Working Paper No. 2024/09*.
4. Prabha, Arun, (1902). (Trans.). Valmiki, Omprakash, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, Columbia University Press, p. 12.
5. Korgaonkar, Bhushan, (2024). (Trans.). Shahu, Patole, *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*, HarperCollins India, p. 117.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
9. Garalyte, Kristina, (2023). Imagining an Anti-Caste Utopia Through Food: Dalit Student Politics in Hyderabad, India, *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, Vol. 4 (2), pp. 230-252.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 236.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
12. Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). *Annihilation of Caste*. Columbia University
13. Korgaonkar, Bhushan, (2024). (Trans.). Shahu, Patole, *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*, HarperCollins India, p. 35.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
15. According to Goffman, stigma is a highly disparaging quality that turns a person from their complete, normal self into a distorted, marginalised one. He maintains that social processes play a crucial role and holds that stigma is a unique form of interaction that an attribute and a stereotype share.
16. Yang, L.H., Kleinman, A., Link, B.G., Phelan, J.C., Lee, S. and Good, B, (2007). Culture and stigma: Adding moral experience to stigma theory, *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 64 (7), pp. 1524-1535.

17. Korgaonkar, Bhushan, (2024). (Trans.). Shahu, Patole, *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*, HarperCollins India, p. 31.
18. Runciman, W, (1966). *Relative deprivation and social justice: A study of attitudes to social inequality in twentieth-century England*, Routledge, p. 11.
19. Appadurai, Arjun, (1981). *Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia*, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 8 (3), pp. 494-511.
20. Korgaonkar, Bhushan, (2024). (Trans.). Shahu, Patole, *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*, HarperCollins India, p. 30.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 123.