

Resisting Culinary Nationalism: Dalit Counter-Cuisines in the Life Narratives of Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble

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Abstract

Culinary nationalism in India has given rise to a hegemony of vegetarianism, excluding numerous regional and ethnic cuisines in the process. A homogeneous culinary identity is attempted by othering specific communities like Christians and Muslims, lower caste Hindus, and tribal groups, disputing the legitimacy of their national belonging and, hence, their culinary traditions. The traditional gender roles of women in kitchen spaces, along with their higher vulnerability to food insecurity, make food a prominent motif in Dalit women's writing. This paper analyses how Dalit culinary practices, as recounted in the life narratives of Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble, contest and redefine culinary nationalism and subvert the notion of ritual pollution or purity. Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* and Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* detail the everyday practices of Dalit women, particularly those concerning food, as resistance to ethno-religious nationalism. Using Michel de Certeau's theorization of everyday life, the paper reads the everyday practices of Dalit women as tactics that resist the strategies of Hindu/cultural nationalism. By depicting a carnival of the silenced Dalit cuisines as counter-cuisines and documenting the recipes of the same, these literary works assert Dalit culinary identities and provide a site for contestation of right-wing culinary hegemony.

Keywords: Culinary nationalism, Cooking, Food, Ritual pollution, Tactics, Strategy

Introduction

Owing to regional variations, the (non)availability of resources, and various other factors, Dalit cuisines have not had a ubiquitous presence across India. Nevertheless, poverty and the sine qua non of adhering to *tamasik*¹ ingredients as per caste norms have historically delimited the quotidian tastes and choices of food for Dalits. As the political scientist Gopal Guru observes, "The upper castes have not only prescribed food for themselves, they have designated foods for other castes as well. For example, in Manu's ritual strictures, *Jhootan*² and the meat of dead

cattle were prescribed to the Untouchables as their staple foods” (Guru 151). The labour of Dalits, often menial, was considered a duty as per caste norms and was not bound to be paid in money. The survival of the community, therefore, depended on *Jhootan*, *baluta* (a share of grains in return for Dalits’ labour), dead cattle, and ‘other’ animals deemed ritually impure. Hunger, the search for food, ritual proscriptions, and discriminatory communal relations can be identified as the prominent themes in Dalit literature.

Set in Maharashtra, *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* predominantly address the shared plight of Dalit women as victims of both sexism and casteism and, while doing so, deliberately engage with right-wing nationalism. The evolution of these authors as activists in the Dalit women’s and anti-caste movements makes it necessary to analyse the works politically, contextualising them against the backdrop of the social and political climate of the time. According to Christophe Jaffrelot, the state of Maharashtra witnessed the emergence of segregationist Hindu nationalism in the 1920s as it surfaced as a reactionary response to the Khilafat movement and was augmented at the ideological level by the works of Maharashtrian Hindu nationalists like V. D. Savarkar and M. S. Golwalkar (14–16). The works of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar largely engage with the post-independence, post-Ambedkarite, and post-Mandal periods in Indian history that called for egalitarian and democratic changes. As Eric Taylor Woods has pointed out, “times of social, cultural and political upheaval resulting from an encounter with modernity” demand an overt expression of “a vision of the nation’s identity, history and destiny” as imparted by cultural nationalism (430). Set against the backdrop of rising ethno-religious nationalism, the selected works denounce the majoritarian culture of Hinduism (and Hindutva)³ and subvert the claims of cultural nationalism. While there are also deliberate attempts to destabilise the universalist claims of Hindu/cultural nationalism in matters of everyday life such as sartorial practices,

religious practices, and rituals of purity/pollution, the works under consideration predominately engage with culinary nationalism—food, cooking, and eating practices as sites of cultural nationalism.

As Kamble claims in an interview, *Jina Amucha*, the Marathi original of *The Prisons We Broke*, was written almost twenty years prior to its publication in 1986 (147). The time period, and hence the socio-political climate, discussed in the work is substantially different from that of Pawar's *Aaydan* (2003), which was translated as *The Weave of My Life* in 2008. Even so, these life narratives bear ideological relationships owing to the authors' shared identity as Mahar Buddhist women as well as the rootedness of both texts to various regions of Maharashtra. Kamble's autobiography traces the emergence of caste reform movements in the early twentieth century and the subsequent development of a Dalit consciousness among the Mahar settlements in Veergaon and Phaltan. Contrariwise, spanning across the later part of the twentieth century, Pawar's literary works study the advent and impact of Dalit modernity among different masses of Dalits who were conscious of their caste identity and related politics. While the Mahar women in Kamble's narrative are shown to break the prisons of caste and gender subjugation, those of Pawar, effected by some momentous years in Dalit history, are independent women determined to weave/write their own lives. *The Weave of My Life* can also, therefore, be read as a follow-up to *The Prisons We Broke*, as these works are committed to documenting the experiences of the larger Mahar community and its women (rather than the individual self). As evinced in Kamble's testimony, which extends to the pre-independence period, the Mahar community remained largely unaffected by the nationalist movement that had reverberations of Hindutva ideology.

This article attempts to analyse the depiction of food in the life narratives of Kamble and Pawar as a resistance to vegetarianism-based culinary nationalism in India. Dalit culinary

practices, as detailed in these works, assert the existence and legitimacy of an othered culinary culture that goes against the Hindu right-wing conceptualization and promotion of a homogeneous national food culture. In the first section, the concept of culinary nationalism is elucidated, and the selected works are shown to resist and reject it. Further, the carnival of non-vegetarian food in the works is used to demonstrate a counter-narrative to the hegemony of vegetarianism in India. The following section uses Michel de Certeau's theorising of everyday lives to study the everyday practices of Mahar women, in their engagement with food and food spaces. The tactics used by Mahar women in culinary practices subvert the larger strategy of Hindutva, offering significant resistance to culinary nationalism.

Resisting culinary nationalism

Food acts as a symbol of national belonging, and in colonial India, food facilitated the conceptualization of the idea of a nation (Sengupta 2010, Berger 2013). It is one of the many symbols of cultural nationalism, widely used by the Hindu right wing in India to create a division, between us and the other. Since the period of the nationalist movement, Hindu/cultural nationalism in India has used food as a tool for identity construction, antagonising various minority religious and caste communities in the process. Stereotyping vegetarianism as the national identity and choice was particularly strong during the colonial period and was strategically used to demarcate the British coloniser as the other. Nationalist leaders like M. K. Gandhi had engaged in discussions about the link of meat eating with power and violence. While the difference in dietary habits was a factor that led to the exoticization of Indians in the West, David Arnold argues that Gandhi's espousal of the largely plant-based Indian diet must be understood as a part of his anti-colonial struggles, even though it had a spiritual side (qtd. in Sathyamala 881).

Nation states intervening with the dietary habits of the people in ways that promote the state's interests are studied under the ambit of terms like culinary nationalism (Ferguson 2010) and gastronationalism (DeSoucey 2010). Nationalism is often criticised in modern times for the ways in which it defines the boundaries of the nation, includes citizens, excludes others (Fuchs 237), and problematizes the definition of citizenship. The fetishism of nationalism as a natural aspect of society also leads to ideological repression, which in turn, justifies and naturalises exploitation and class structures in society (Fuchs 238). Similarly, in the Indian context, cultural nationalism could, thus, naturalise the caste and communal distinctions that operate within society. DeSoucey defines gastronationalism as “the use of food production, distribution, and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment, as well as the use of national sentiments to produce and market food” (DeSoucey 433). Attempts to create a national cuisine often invoke questions about the authenticity and origins of a dish. On the other hand, culinary nationalism takes a more comprehensive approach and takes into consideration the entire dynamics of “cooking, serving, selling, buying and eating,” (King 3) as well as the production and distribution of ingredients and the values attributed to these processes. Pointing at the systemic ways of excluding subaltern dietary habits (with a variety of non-vegetarian cuisines) from its purview, Michaël Bruckert argues that culinary nationalism in India, identified as “a process of exclusion, of purification”, functions through the othering of specific religious communities and social groups, rather than through a positive affirmation of national cuisines (315).

While lower caste Hindus, tribal groups, and religious minorities like Muslims and Christians are very often the victims of such exclusion and resultant violence, such food-based discrimination is also subject to spatial variation. Although state-imposed legal restrictions on cattle trade and slaughter are less severe in the northeastern states, mostly inhabited by tribal

communities, the food culture of these states is excluded from the national imagination owing to their race and caste statuses. Discrimination against tribal food culture is prevalent even within the state of Kerala, where beef is a popular dish and cattle trade and slaughter are not legally restricted. Representations in popular culture, such as the Malayalam film *Bamboo Boys* (2002), directed by Ramasimhan, ridicule the food practices of tribals and their unfamiliarity with mainstream eating practices, thereby normalising the food-based discrimination directed towards tribals. According to Article 48 of the Indian Constitution, states are vested with the authority to legislate on the preservation of cattle, which comes under their purview. While states such as Kerala, Goa, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and West Bengal have imposed little or no restrictions on cattle trade and slaughter, the laws turn severe among states in the Hindi belt. Even Indian *Thali*, which Guru identifies as a “nationalist construction” (153), is subject to regional variations in terms of the primacy attributed to North Indian *Thali*, which often gets recognised as the ‘Indian’ *Thali*. Thus, understanding culinary regionalism is significant to understanding culinary nationalism in the context of India, where the stigmatisation of food varies across communities and regions, leading to the marginalisation or mainstreaming of food cultures. The stigmatisation of food, thus, varies across communities and regions, leading to the marginalisation or mainstreaming of certain food cultures.

When it comes to food-based discrimination in India, stigma towards beef consumption is further aggravated by the involvement of the state, often leading to structural violence. Using the estimates of national surveys, Balmurli Natrajan and Suraj Jacob argue that the incidence of beef eating among Dalit and Muslim populations does not have a positive correlation with the availability of livestock. They claim that the incidence of beef eating among Scheduled Castes (SCs) in the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh is linked to the radical Dalit liberation movements in these states (63). They also relate the higher incidence of

beef eating among Muslims in West Bengal, Assam, and Kerala to their higher population share in these states. The positive correlation between the population share of the Muslim community in a state and their higher consumption of beef, thus, points to the majoritarian pressures involved in the discrimination against beef consumption (62). Strategic attempts made to confer national status upon upper caste Hindu/*sattvik* diet, simultaneously exclude meat, particularly beef, from the purview of national cuisines. The status of sacred animal conferred on the cow in Hindutva ideology, augmented by the *tamasik* status attributed to the meat of cattle, makes the consumption of cattle meat unacceptable and detested by the right wing. On the other hand, the oeuvre of Dalit literature resists this ethno-religious conceptualization by documenting the culinary practices of the other, including detailed recipes for non-vegetarian (including beef) dishes and varied eating habits.

The works of Kamble and Pawar, while detailing the culinary practices of Mahar communities in Maharashtra, provide a carnival of non-vegetarian food that contests the hegemony of vegetarianism in India. One mechanism deployed by Pawar in challenging culinary nationalism is denying the existence of a homogeneous national cuisine by foregrounding their unfamiliarity with the palatal tastes of upper caste cuisines. In *The Weave of My Life*, Pawar makes reference to Savarkar's *sahabhajan* (inter-caste dining) programme that served sweet dishes such as *bundi ladus* and *jalebis* from the upper caste cuisines. Pawar reminisces about how her elder sister would leave the school to eat the upper caste delicacies. Even as discriminatory commensal relations got addressed in the context of caste reform movements, programmes like *sahabhajan* sought to sanskritize⁴ subaltern dietary practices instead of accommodating them. Pawar talks about her sister's sanskritization after getting exposed to the lives of her upper-caste friends. Pawar is rather sceptical about the Brahmin cuisines that her sister tried to reproduce: “[s]he cooked some tur dal, mashed it well, mixed

some salt in it and called it waran! [...] . . . Of course, this waran bhat was no match for our food!” (101).

Dismissal of tastes from the Brahmin cuisines as insipid and relishing or fetishizing of subaltern cuisines become significant in the context of the Hindutva promoting upper caste cuisines as the national cuisine. While adherence to vegetarianism is presumed to be the sine qua non of culinary consciousness and, in turn, nationalist consciousness, Kamble and Pawar invariably take pride in the aberrant culinary tradition of the Mahar communities. In the 1980s, as Arjun Appadurai identified, cookbooks, both those that catered to regional cuisines and those that attempted a national cuisine, contributed to imagining a national cuisine for India. According to him, “[t]he idea of an ‘Indian’ cuisine has emerged because of, rather than despite, the increasing articulation of regional and ethnic cuisines” (21). But, this notion of a national cuisine has since witnessed a drastic shift towards vegetarian and *sattvik* cuisines with the rise of Hindutva forces in India.

The accounts of Kamble and Pawar resist the “generalized gastroethnic image” (Appadurai 16) produced by ethnic and regional cookbooks and provide an alternative regional food culture. Documentation of Dalit cuisines becomes significant in the context of increased attempts to project India as a vegetarian nation that simultaneously erases subaltern food memories from popular imagination. Further, the repertoire of Dalit cuisines in these texts, as evinced in the detailed descriptions of the preparation of dishes such as roasted *chanya* (sun-dried meat strips), *katyacha motla* (a fish dish, leaf-wrapped and baked), *saar* (leftover water from boiling fish), *panji* (meat soup), and others, goes against the notion of a pan-Indian Hindu cuisine. The textualization of these recipes happens in a context where food cooked by Dalits is deemed ritually impure and therefore unacceptable for caste Hindus. Kamble’s comparison of *walni* (the string used for hanging and drying animal intestines) to *janeu* (the sacred thread

worn by Brahmin men) exemplifies the same. While *janeu* and *walni* are indicators of caste identity, the former confers sanctity and the latter the status of outcasts. From asserting pride to *walni*, Kamble moves on to a celebration of Dalit cuisines and cooking methods without concealing the community's lack of access to resources.

The documentation of Dalit cuisines in the texts under consideration occasionally extends to establishing their ties with Mahar festivals, religious rituals, and customs, thereby presenting an alternative culture that goes against the claims of cultural nationalism. For instance, Kamble's recollection of the festivities of the month of Ashadh is suffused with descriptions of cuisines and associated ritual performances. Kamble details the ritual sacrifice of the buffalo, which was preceded by the procession of the animal through the village. Ritual offerings prepared using the organs of the buffalo and *panji* form a part of Kamble's food memories. Nostalgic recollections of festivities such as the buffalo fair and cuisines made with the meat obtained from slaughtered animals (rather than dead animals) are ways of asserting one's culinary practices: "Even today, if you find large pieces of meat in your meal, they say, 'Such big pieces! Are they from the buffalo fair?'" (Kamble 35). Such narratives posit that an alternate culinary culture, rather than *Jhootan*, defined the palatal tastes of the Dalit communities.

The ideology of Hindutva prescribed Dalits' consumption of meat from dead cattle. Abstaining from the consumption of carrion and thereby asserting self-respect was central to Ambedkar's idea of Dalit emancipation. Gandhi, on the other hand, used the dogmas of Hinduism to object to the slaughter of cows and the consumption of dead cattle— "a soul-destroying habit" (qtd. in Sathyamala 882). Such discussions on Dalit dietary reforms began in the early twentieth century. Kamble recounts how her grandmother compared the flesh of a dead animal to that of a pig, a taboo food for Mahars, thereby using the notion of ritual pollution

to stop the consumption of dead animals among the Mahars (70). According to Guru, Dalit food practices have undergone reformative changes with regard to ways of procuring meat. From obtaining *Murdada* (the meat of dead animals) to *Hatfatka* (the meat of animals caught by hunting), there was a shift to the consumption of *Toliv* (the meat of slaughtered animals) (152). Such radical changes in dietary practices, which went against caste-based food prescriptions, get commemorated in the selected works. Kamble recalls Ambedkar's address to the Mahar community in a meeting in Jejuri: "Stop eating dead animals . . . Don't believe in god and religion" (66). Evidently, Ambedkar's objection was against the state of Dalits remaining "masters only of the dead animals" (Kamble 49). Ambedkar attributed much importance to the renouncement of caste-based food practices, including *baluta* and bonded labour such as *yeskar pali*, a shift proudly recalled in Dalit life narratives like Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (1978). But, as recounted in Urmila Pawar's work, the consumption of *Jhootan* was very much normalised that the practice continued even in times of abundance: "Food was never scarce in the house. On the contrary, on the next day, Dhulwad, we cooked plenty of mutton and chicken and a big potful of rice in our house. Thoralibay would make plenty of vadas with chickpea flour. Yet her daughters-in-law would go begging for the festive food" (51). In fact, the Hindu religion was strategically leveraged to normalise caste-based practises such as Dalits eating dead animals. Renouncing such practices was therefore considered a religious sacrilege: "How dare you ask us to give up our custom of eating dead animals! . . . God has drawn a line for us and you want us to cross it? Listen, we are born for this work. That's our sacred duty" (Kamble 66–67).

A section of the Dalit community, having internalised the norms of caste hierarchy, was reluctant to renounce the discriminatory social order. Ambedkar's rejection of caste-based culinary practices was aimed at reclaiming dignity and cannot be seen as an attempt to

sanskritize the Dalit community. The works of Kamble and Pawar, while celebrating their rejection of *Murdada*, engage in an assertion of the non-vegetarian cuisines of Dalit communities. Culinary nationalism in India operates in the ethno-religious realm, and the selected texts engage with the same by providing counter-narratives to the hegemony of vegetarianism, culinary chauvinism, and the notion of ritual pollution or purity.

The everyday lives of Mahar women

In his study of the everyday lives of people, Certeau uses the concept of strategies and tactics to elucidate the destabilisation of power relations between users and producers of culture and argues that users are not passive consumers of the rules exercised by dominant systems. According to Certeau, the powerful, having access to mechanisms of power and control over space, implement power in ways that can be called strategies. He defines strategy as the “calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated” (*The Practice* 35-36). Combining the realm of “three types of space—power, theory, and praxis” (Certeau, “On the Oppositional” 7), strategy operates in a structured manner. Tactics, on the other hand, subvert strategies through practices of resistance offered by those outside the systems of power. According to Certeau, having no advantage over space, tactics count on the “utilization of time, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power” (*The Practice* 39). Certeau recognises tactics in everyday activities such as cooking, walking, and reading. These activities involve artistic, although purposive, ways in which the weak contest the totalizing systems of power that the strategy exercises. Deemed to operate “‘in the enemy’s field of vision’ . . . and in the space controlled by him” (“On the Oppositional” 6), tactics remain agile and seek the right moment to act. Tactics employ discrete actions to subvert the totalizing system of a strategy.

In Certeau's terms, the politicisation of everyday life makes it possible to uncover tactics in the everyday practices of Dalit women, specifically those concerning food, by contextualising them against the larger strategy of Hindu nationalism. The socio-biographical nature of *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life*, as their translator Maya Pandit has claimed (Pawar xv–xvi), enables these life narratives to function as archival sources that shed light on the everyday lives of Mahar communities, predominantly that of the women of the community. The everyday acts of Mahar women in procuring, cooking, serving, and consuming food, as documented in these life narratives, bear resistance to the dominant ideology of Hindutva. Carolyn Hibbs identifies the positioning of Dalit female bodies in the life narratives of Kamble and Pawar as sites that subvert the notion of ritual pollution at multiple levels by carrying the 'untouchability' of both caste and gender. This, as Hibbs pointed out, methodically destabilises the dogmas of Hinduism that confer pollution or purity upon bodies, and is furthered by the writers' assertion of their conversion to Buddhism (Hibbs 276). While religious conversion is a calculated act of resistance, there are several everyday acts of resistance by Mahar women that, even when "not undertaken with the purpose of disruption or social engagement" (Colebrook 698), subvert the hegemony of Hindutva. Even while being oppressed by their gender and caste identities, the everyday tactical practises of Mahar women contest the dictums of casteism, sexism, and culinary nationalism. This is discernible in their engagement with ritual pollution/purity especially in matters of cooking and eating. Mahar women's employment of various tactics in everyday practices as recounted in the selected works can be chiefly distinguished as those of survival and resistance, although the former cannot be (dis)regarded as wholly apolitical.

The accounts of these Dalit women reveal instances where the marginalised in society carried out acts of resistance to norms that may not exist elsewhere. These tactical acts were

carried out by individuals with no power in relation to concerns that are local—casteist in this case—with no universal relevance. In Kamble’s accounts of Veergaon from her childhood, most of the Mahar houses of the place were small one-room ones, a corner of which served as the kitchen. From the *tawa* (pan) with burnout holes to the *walni*, material objects in the Dalit kitchen spaces symbolised destitution and ritual pollution. Kamble’s remark that “[the *walni*] were our holy threads, the markers of our birth, our caste—like the *janeu* of the brahmins” (8) is indicative of the way ritual pollution functioned as markers of identity for the Dalits, leading to their othering. Dalits have curiously employed tactics of humour and satire in this situation. According to Certeau,

[tactic] profits from and depends upon “occasions” without a base in which to stock supplies, to augment a proper space, and to anticipate sorties. What it gains cannot be held. This non-space doubtless permits mobility, but requires amenability to the hazards of time, in order to seize the possibilities that a moment offers. It must vigilantly utilize the gaps which the particular combination of circumstances open[s] in the control of the proprietary power. It poaches here. It creates surprises. It is possible for it to be where no one expects it. It is wile. (Certeau, “On the Oppositional” 6)

The comment on the caste order that emanated from Kamble in this context is, thus, a tactic that surprises and makes the best use of the given context to raise a comparison or a criticism. This act of wit is capable of shocking the adversary, the recipient; the reader of Kamble’s narrative. In addition to not observing the purity of kitchen spaces as prescribed by casteist norms, Mahar women in the selected works also separated their everyday acts of cooking from religious beliefs. As Kancha Ilaiah observes, for the Dalit woman, “cooking is a mundane activity, meant to feed the human body and keep it going”, whereas for the upper caste Hindus, “cooking takes place primarily in the name of God” (*Why I Am* 26). While the everyday chores

of Mahar women maintained a substantial detachment from Hindu rituals, it was not so in the festive month of *Ashadh*. As Kamble recollects in her narrative, in the month of *Ashadh*, the Mahar women observed certain rituals of purity through acts of bathing, cleaning the household and polishing it with cow or buffalo dung. But in matters of food, be it the food consumed or offered to the deity, concerns of ritual purity were ‘tactically’ evaded. Ritual offerings to the deities included lemon, *ganja*/marijuana, egg, opium, wheat, and *suti rotis*, while sweet *chappatis* made with *arhar* dal, wheat flour, and jaggery formed the festive food for the inhabitants of Maharwada, the area where the Mahar community lived. Although the *nivad* (offering to the deity) comprised cooked organs of buffalo, it was consumed after ritual veneration by touching it on the forehead (Kamble 34), an act that subverts the ritual impurity of cattle flesh in Hinduism. While *Ashadh* is commemorated not exclusively for the availability of delicacies, food becomes a continued presence in the ritual practices of the month. The Mahar community’s preoccupation with thoughts of food implies the relative absence of food on non-festive days. Food also forms the major subject matter in *potraja*’s (godman’s) prayer to goddess *Lakamai*, whom they believed could be made “happy and quiet” with sacrificial offerings of animals along with food made of grains: “The Mother sits on a throne/ Her food is hen and goat / Suti roti is what she likes/ It’s *potraja*’s honour to offer it to her” (Kamble 20). By documenting such offerings of food that are likely to be labelled as aberrant in the upper caste Hindu religious tradition, these Dalit women writers are attempting to legitimise the quotidian diet of Dalits, and are also challenging any claim of a uniform, national culinary practice.

In her autobiography, Kamble recalls that the leftover and stale food items collected from the upper caste villages were known as *ambura*, and its boiled form, called *ukadala*, was the standard diet of the inhabitants of the Maharwada even in the early twentieth century (39).

Evidently, the caste system with its prescriptions and proscriptions was not intended for the Dalits to relish their food. In spite of this, memories of times when food was in abundance were kept alive in Dalit accounts to pull through adverse times. Memories of the festive month of *Ashadh*, “a month of comfort of sweet food” (12), and that of the buffalo fair were cherished with the motive of surviving the food insecurity felt during the rest of the year. While memories of hunger and humiliation associated with the consumption of *Jhootan* are central to the narrative of Kamble, digressions from such memories of pain cannot be overlooked or undermined. Memories of food in both Kamble’s and Pawar’s narratives extend to a recollection of culinary skills, recipes, and palatal tastes. Such instances of culinary memories can be seen as an art of tactics that “develops an aptitude for always being in the other’s place without possessing it, and for profiting from its alteration without destroying itself through it” (*The Practice* 87). Although each recollection subjects them to changes, memory is dynamic, a characteristic that, according to Certeau, gives it more advantage over time as a tactical art. While a recollection of the palatal tastes of the dishes made during the month of *Ashadh* enabled the Mahar community to remain hopeful in their everyday experience of food insecurity, Mahar women’s recalling of the recipes of such delicacies also aided in giving pride to Dalit culinary practises.

For the Mahar community, fantasising about food was another tactic for survival. In *The Practice of Everyday Life: Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, Luce Giard talks about the poor and the hungry “indefinitely dreaming of an impossible satiation, of an abundance that might invert the common law of proportions” even when they lacked such memories of food (173–174). As Kamble recounts, “[we] ate dry husk and told ourselves we were eating rich food” (34). From Kamble’s narrative, it is evident that engaging in fanciful stories about sumptuous meals, palaces, and other riches was quintessential to the everyday lives of the Mahar

communities. These acts of fantasy also challenged the caste order that prohibited such delicacies for the Dalits, either directly or through controlling the resources. The caste order did not concern itself with providing any situation that would motivate Dalits to eat or to stay well. Hence, such fanciful stories of meals, and luxuries need to be understood as Dalit tactics to fight such an oppressive social order.

During Pawar's childhood, the Public Distribution System (PDS) had begun, and the everyday food of Dalits consisted of rice bought from ration shops. The PDS is symbolic of the shift from the caste order that denied necessary resources to the Dalits to a welfare one under the modern democratic order. *Bhakri* made of millets or husk, side dishes made of pulses known as *kulith*, dried fish or small fish cooked with meagre ingredients like onions, chilli powder, and salt, and side dishes made of *aloo* (potato) leaves began to be regularly consumed in the Mahar households. *Aloo* leaves and other leafy vegetables from the backyard were cooked in plenty, whereas rice was used miserly. Pawar details how mothers told stories to make the children neglect the shortage of rice on their plates. These stories filled with humour averted their attention from the insipidity of *aloo* curry, cooked and served in liberal amounts (95). Pawar reminisces about the story of a mother-in-law repeatedly serving her son-in-law sumptuous amounts of *aloo* curry as soon as he finished it and began to eat the little available rice. This story was narrated by Pawar's mother to make her children ignore the scarcity of rice on their plates. In the story, the mother-in-law makes deliberate attempts to engage in a conversation with her son-in-law so as to let the repeated servings of *aloo* curry go unnoticed. As the mother-in-law asks "how many brothers are you", the son-in-law replies, "If I survive this curry, four, otherwise, three!" (95). Pawar recalls how she and her siblings frequently recollected and laughed over this story at the time of their meagre meals.

Such oral narratives had a universal appeal among Mahar women as Pawar points out that her mother-in-law and her mother had also narrated the same story of a boy who, instead of complaining about being served *bhakri* without any side dishes, engaged in an act of make-believe that he was eating it with vegetables. The mother in the story gave the child an empty bowl along with the *bhakri* to encourage him to fantasise about a side dish. Pawar's mother too narrated such stories to her children and coaxed them to eat coarse food such as husk *bhakri*, which was often the only available food: "Eat it, eat it child! Only the person who can eat such food can achieve a lot of good!" (94). At the same time, as a child, Pawar was also reprimanded for preparing some dishes that she had learned from her upper caste friend's home, for these food items required a good deal of oil and sugar (99). While it may point to the scarcity of resources in the Dalit households, humorous stories about the community's lack of experience with the palatal tastes and recipes of mainstream upper caste society were capable of adding lightness to the communities' everyday acts of engaging with food. Kamble narrates an incident from her childhood when a man mixed a mud idol with pieces of chapatti, mistaking it for jaggery. Sweetness was so alien to the Dalit tongue that the person ate it along with his nephews without recognising the change of ingredients (48). Humorous stories about the Dalit's unfamiliarity with mainstream dishes can be found in Pawar's autobiography as well. These include stories of a husband who asked his wife to make *modak* (a sweet dish), and was instead served a mixture of various ingredients required for the dish; and that of a shepherd who was impressed by the sight of a *ghavan*, a simple dish that has tiny holes in it, and readily traded his buffalo for five *ghavans* (98). Through humorous recollections of such real-life or fictional instances, the Mahar community disputed the claims of universality associated with mainstream upper caste cuisines, which often get celebrated as national ones. Their everyday acts of engaging in humour, fantasy, and memory in matters of food contribute to the

“ingenious ways in which the weak [Mahar women] make use of the strong” (Certeau, *The Practice* xvii).

In *Everyday Nationalism: Women of the Hindu Right in India*, Kalyani Devaki Menon talks about the role of women activists in the Hindu nationalist movement in “construct[ing] the nation, Hindu subjectivity, and indeed Hinduism itself” by “[using] religious texts, discourses, symbols, and rituals” (16). While the prominence attributed to maternal subjectivity within the nationalist movement points to the role of mothers in instilling the values of Hindutva in their children, the everyday roles of Mahar women contradict the Hindu nationalist construct of motherhood. Dalit women’s culinary tactics extend to culinary skills that resist the strategy of Hinduism, which has totalized the Dalit diet as poor and polluted. Resistance to hunger and ritual pollution included the countless ways in which food was preserved. As Pawar recounts, when fish came in abundance, even the water in which the fish was boiled, called *kaat*, was stored for the future. The *kaat* seasoned with chilli powder, salt, and raw mango, called *saar*, formed a part of the everyday diet of the daughters-in-law of the Mahar houses. In the absence of men, women are said to have survived on this (Pawar 100), implying how the Mahar patriarchy restricted food to their women and controlled their eating practices. The preparation of *chanya*, detailed in both Pawar’s and Kamble’s narratives, enabled the preservation of cattle meat, particularly in times of animal epidemics when meat could be procured in abundance. Such preservation techniques are an art of tactics that, with their timely intervention and the intelligent use of opportunity (animal epidemics or other situations when food could be procured in abundance), transform the situation into a favourable one.

Similarly, the prolonged baking involved in the preparation of the dish *katyacha motla* enabled it to be carried on the way. This particularly facilitated women who ate their meals on the way back to their houses after selling grass or firewood. Such lasting dishes made with fish

formed side dishes to dry *bhakris* that women ate on the road (Pawar 101). In fact, eating on the road, so as to extend the working hours, was such a customary practice among Dalit women of Ratnagiri that it later became a punishable offence in the place. In her work, Pawar mocks the apathetic legal system of the period, which failed to ensure respite for women and was rather concerned about social etiquette. Pawar recounts how some Mahar women, having assimilated the gendered notions of leisure, “[considered] it a punishment to sit down and eat” (287). While the distribution of food remained gendered, with roasted *chanya* forming the breakfast of men and the comparatively innutritious *saar* becoming the side dish for women, these preservation techniques invariably resisted hunger, itself a product of the larger strategy of upper caste Hinduism. In fact, food turns out to be a leitmotif in Dalit women’s literature, owing to women’s traditional gender roles in relation to kitchen spaces, their higher vulnerability to food insecurity, and the expectations of gender norms to perform self-denial in matters of food. The engagement with food by Kamble and Pawar expands from a politics of gender normativity to a critique of culinary nationalism, an offshoot of and an auxiliary to Hindu/cultural nationalism. The very act of relishing food such as roasted *chanya* and *katyacha motla* itself subverted the ritual status of these food items. These are some of the many instances of everyday acts of resistance asserting the existence and legitimacy of otherwise transgressive Dalit food and eating practises. Mahar women in these works, in the performance of their everyday roles as mothers, daughters, daughters-in-law, wives, sisters, and mothers-in-law, engage with norms of religion, caste, occupation, and domestic work in such ways that they defy the ideological constructions of cultural nationalism and its advocacy of culinary homogeneity.

Conclusion

In the context of the hegemony of vegetarianism strategically attempting to obliterate the subaltern, mostly non-vegetarian food culture from the public imagination, reclaiming it becomes a significant act of resistance and assertion of one's identity. Countering the attempts to erase subaltern food memories, the life narratives of Kamble and Pawar provide sensual descriptions of Dalit cuisines that can even be considered as verbal food pornography. While detailing food in ways that evoke palatal taste, smell, sight, and texture helps in keeping alive Dalit food memories, the desirability attributed to the food adds sanguinity to these memories, which could otherwise be overshadowed by circumstances of hunger and lack of resources. The detailed documentation of Dalit recipes and culinary practices in the selected works subverts the claims of culinary nationalism by positing alternative, aberrant culinary traditions.

Notes

1. According to Ayurveda, *trigunas* refer to one's inborn qualities, *sattvik*, *rajasik*, and *tamasik*, which control the mind and health. *Sattvik* refers to qualities like a positive attitude, happiness, spiritual connection, etc. *Rajasik* is associated with passion, and *tamasik* with negative thoughts, lethargy, sleeplessness, etc.
2. In "Food as a Metaphor for Caste Hierarchies", Gopal Guru explains the multifacetedness of the term *Jhootan*. While the term could be literally translated as leftovers remaining in a plate after eating, it bears metaphorical and theoretical underpinnings. Therefore, the term is *Jhootan* and not *jhootan* throughout the paper. While it implies the (ritual) pollution of rotten bread, drawing from the short story "The Poisoned Bread" by Bandhumadhav and many other Dalit narratives included in a compilation of Marathi Dalit literature titled *Poisoned Bread*, Guru argues that it can also allude to class or caste violence. Even as it embodies Dalit subservience, the ritual status associated with the term gets subverted in Dalit literature. *Jhootan* can be

understood at the material level as a substance, the quantity of which corresponds to the quality of sleep it induces. Further, the term gets used in the context of Marxist philosophy as well (148).

3. The majoritarian culture of Hinduism refers to Hindu religion as represented by the upper caste, or Brahminical culture. Hindutva is used synonymously with Hindu nationalism, a right-wing political ideology advocated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Hindutva claims to encompass other religions of Indian origin, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. While religion is the pivot for Hinduism, it is also the national identity of Hindutva.
4. According to M. N. Srinivas, sanskritization is a lower caste person's attempt to ascent to a higher position in the caste hierarchy by adopting Brahminic customs and beliefs. Srinivas introduced the term in his work *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*.

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