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GOPAL GURU

Visiting Scholar (Summer 2009)

Center for the Advanced Study of India

University of Pennsylvania

Professor of Social and Political Theory, Center of Political Science,
Jawaharlal Nehru University

CENTER FOR THE ADVANCED STUDY OF INDIA

University of Pennsylvania

3600 Market Street, Suite 560

Philadelphia, PA 19104

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ABSTRACT

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GOPAL GURU
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The above title, I claim, represents multiple meanings that are attached to Food as substance and the *Jaika* or “taste” as an idea emanating from the substance. Hence, it is necessary to lay bare different possible meanings that are associated with food. These meanings are both contiguous to and separate from each other. Let us see how they assimilate and dissociate from each other. Food and cooked food are different from each other in a major way. Food has a universal value to the extent that it, as a substance, becomes an essential need for the very survival of all the organic bodies: plants, animals and human beings. Thus, food, at one level, suggests an ontological equality cutting across several organic bodies. Of course, food acquires a specific importance when looked from the point of view of human beings. Unlike plants, human beings require a particular kind of food for their very survival. They require, in most cases, food grains as a primary condition. Thus the denial of food would jeopardize the very survival of human beings. Hence, food falls into the realm of human rights. Furthermore, the denial of food constitutes a violation of human rights. Some of the laudable efforts led by Jean Dreze – who with the help of some NGOs has prepared the bill concerning the right to food – are directed towards making the right to food a safety network against the violation of human rights.

Gopal Guru
Visiting Scholar, Center for the Advanced Study of India
Professor of Social and Political Theory, Center of Political Science, Jawaharlal Nehru
University

Cooked food is a derivative of food grains but is different from the later in a fundamental way. It is different in as much as it deals more with meaningful survival and not just mere survival. It is the cooked food that becomes the major source of multiple reading; material, moral, metaphysical, social, cultural, political, etc. Cooked food is the potential source of humiliation, if not the violation of human rights. As I will argue in rest of the paper, cooked food generates cultural hierarchies both across and within the social groups, which then can lead to the conditions of humiliation. Food hierarchies and resultant subjective attitudes form the basic concern in this particular work. Before I elaborate, it is important that I throw some light on the other dimension of cooked food.

There are several ways that have been followed, by both philosophical minds as well as folklorist minds, to use cooked food as a powerful metaphor for reaching out to the common masses. Thus, the Buddha used mustard seeds to bring out the light of universal truth within emotionally driven persons. It has been argued by some scholars that Plato used food as a constraint for the philosophical mind. That is to say, bothering for food too much is not the concern of the soul or the philosophers. But, at the same time, they can feed on the food produced by the slaves and cooked by women.¹ In more recent times, political leaders use cooked food as a metaphor to underscore and subsequently communicate the more serious normative meaning to common people.

¹ Deane W. Curtin Introduction, ed, *Cooking , Eating , Thinking. Transformative Philosophy of Food*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis., 1992.

Let me illustrate with a few examples to elaborate on this dimension of cooked food. Since I am more familiar with the “Maharashtrian” food culture, I, for the sake of convenience, will use *Bhakari* (millet bread), which has been used by some of the prominent personalities belonging to a different universe of imagination. They chose *Bhakari* as the metaphor because it forms an important part of the daily staple food of the toiling masses in Maharashtra. Thus, *Bhakari*, so it is believed by these personalities, can serve as a powerful metaphor to communicate rather effectively the difficult, philosophically loaded meaning. Among those who have used this metaphor is Mr. Sharad Pawar, a prominent political leader from Maharashtra. In the context of the set-back that his party has received in the recently held Lok Sabha Elections, he used the metaphor of *Bhakari* to explain to his party workers the importance of rotation as a justice principle. He said, “*Jar ka Bhaakri firwali nahi tar thi karapte*”²; if one fails to reverse the side of millet bread on the frying pan, it gets overcooked (*karapte*) or, literally, corrupted. He used the metaphor of *Bhakari* only to convey that it is important to rotate the candidates through genuine distribution of tickets for the election. Pawar is trying to concretize the social meaning of *Bhakari* by starting from the concrete experience of *Bhakari*, which becomes a possibility only in the actual possession of *Bhakari* on the frying pan (*Tawa*). On the other hand, Narayan Surve, a revolutionary poet from Maharashtra, has also used the metaphor of Moon for *Bhakari*. Thus, he starts from the abstract to the concrete, from the utopian to the real. This metaphor, unlike the one used by Pawar, works not in the context of justice but in the context of equality. Surve’s very famous poem, “*Ardhy Bhakaricha Chandar*”³ (half moon is like

² Loksatta, Mumbai, (Marathi daily) 17th June, 2009.

³ Narayan Surve, ‘ Sampurna Survey, Lok wangmay Gruha, Mumabi, 1987.

half *Bhakari*) entails a contradictory meaning. On the one hand, it suggests getting half a portion of *Bhakari* gives a perennially half; for a starving person the joy is as if this person has got the moon itself. On the other hand, this metaphor of moon for *Bhakari* could also be read for drawing the opposite meaning, that even getting half a *Bhakari* is as difficult as catching the half moon in the sky. It is because of this impossibility of getting a *Bhakari* that Surve begins from moon and not *Bhakari* as a concrete substance, for it is not an everyday possibility in the life of the poor. One can further read into his metaphor and argue that at least one can see the Moon every day, but one may not be able to see even a half or a quarter *Bhakari*. Thus, in Surve's poem, there is a different order of aesthetic that is involved. It is more about the imagined or abstract moon, while Pawar's aesthetic emerges from the concrete, the *Bhakari*. Aesthetic in Pawar's metaphor of *Bhakari* reflects the beauty of *Bhakari*, which is built up around a proper round shape, an attractive size and a faint golden color. I am sure that poets from other cultural experiences must use their food items as metaphors to convey different meanings that have bearing on the existential conditions of the toiling, hungry millions.

Yet, in another context, some of the leading poets from different parts of India have used "poison bread" as the metaphor for *Jhootan*, "rotten" *Bhakari*.⁴ The Dalit poets have used *Jhootan* as a metaphor so as to create a sense of self-respect against *Jhootan*, which epitomizes the state of servility.⁵ At the more abstract level, some of the creative minds, used *Jhootan* in order to explain Marxian dialectics. *Jhootan* is normally a

⁴ Arjun Dangle. I am just paraphrasing the term used by Dangle. *Poison Bread*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1987.

⁵ Om Prakash Valmiki, *Jhootan*, (6 Hindi), Vani Publication, Delhi, 1996.

“rotten” more fermented food; if eaten it can gradually put one to sleep. The more *Jhootan* one eats, the sleepier one begins to feel. Thus, *Jhootan* suggests the change from quantitative to qualitative.

Finally, let me offer an interesting kind of metaphor used by none other than Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Ambedkar has used another non-Dalit-specific but more general food item *puran poli*⁶ (*paratha* stuffed with sweet paste in the middle) as the metaphor to capture the dynamics of history and radical change. Dr. Ambedkar has used *puran poli*,⁷ as the metaphor in order to describe the historical importance or the sequences of the two major revolutions: the French and the Russian Revolutions. The French Revolution for him was like the outer layer of the folded *poli*; the Russian Revolution was like the *puran* which is stuffed in the folded *poli*. *Puran* (sweet paste) is the core, which defines the *puran poli*, but these two ingredients are equally important to make a complete sense of *poli*. One is incomplete without the other.

However, within the Dalit cultural universe, one finds differential use of metaphors that are related to food. The difference has to be understood in terms of the ontological shift within the Dalit community itself. Those who have been able to achieve some material success and stabilized their food recipe could become the part of the cultural aspiration of the upper-caste/upper-class and would use the metaphor according to their new cultural taste. And those who have not been “fortunate” enough to change their material condition would naturally use the metaphor which is closer to their existential

⁷ Arun Kambel, Jantatil Ambedkarnche lekh. (Marathi) Granthali, Mumbai, 1996.

condition. Let me explain this ontological differentiation, which becomes discernable in the differential Dalit perception of Ambedkar's philosophy.

In Dalit middle class families, sweet items have become stabilized in their every day meals. The middle-class Dalit literary imagination uses sweets as a metaphor to access Ambedkar's philosophy. Thus sweets, for whatever reasons, occupy their cultural imagination. This domination of sweet percolates from cultural to intellectual. This is clear from the following Marathi dictum that a middle class Dalit is often seen using: "*Baba Sahebanchi wani, Jusi Barphi Pedhywani,*"⁸ The philosophy of Ambedkar is like sweets. This metaphor seeks to detect the social location of a Dalit, and it also accurately summarizes his aspiration for accommodation into the pacificatory structures. Sweet is both pacificatory as well as neutralizing. One uses sweet in order to neutralize the impact created by the hot chili. The metaphor of sweet, it could be argued, denies Ambedkar's philosophy as a subversive character. But not so the ones especially deployed by the common Dalits. Let us look at the subaltern Dalits and the metaphor that they use. They say, "*Baba sahebanchi wani jashi Bhakari Chatani wani,*"⁹ meaning the philosophy of Ambedkar is like *Bhakari* (bread) and *Chatani* (green chili paste) and hence is subversive like hot chili. This particular subaltern perception involving hot spice chili paste as the powerful metaphor in turn suggests two important things. First, it makes Ambedkar's philosophy as subversive as chili; *Chatani* as a metaphor symbolically suggests an oppositional imagination and the subaltern Dalits see this imagination reflected in the philosophy of Ambedkar. Second, the metaphor of *Chatani*

⁸ This was the poem that was read by one of the known dalit poet on the Marathi Door Darshan some year back.

⁹ This perception is available in the oral tradition of dalit women in parts of Vidarbha region of Maharashtra.

also underlines the internal differentiation within the Dalit community in terms of both cultural and intellectual tastes. The Dalit middle-class uses food as a metaphor for harmony, while the subaltern Dalit uses the metaphor that suggests subversion. The metaphor of sweet as used by the middle-class Dalit may not have been worn out but seems to be devoid of subversive power. Paradoxically, it is not chili that determines the notion of taste; on the contrary, it is the sweet that defines the notion of taste. Taste, I will argue in the following sections, can be defined in terms of the idea of difference and not sameness.

WHAT IS TASTE?

Defining taste is not an easy task, for taste is used in a very generic sense of the term. Hence, I would try to define it particularly in terms of the specific contradictory relationship between the tongue and the skin. It is the tongue that plays a crucial role in defining the taste of a particular cooked food. There also may be a secondary contradiction between the tongue and the stomach. Food is approved or allowed by the tongue, and, in turn, the tongue rejects whatever is allowed by an upset stomach. Hot chili, particularly chili powder or smashed green chilies, if applied topically on any part of the body, is bound to produce the universal impact of a burning sensation all over the body and not just on the tongue. It is the skin that provides the tasting conditions for a food prepared with green or red chilies; it is the skin that produces a similar experience while the tongue produces difference in taste. To put differently, the tongue decides the range of taste, while the skin maps out the length of taste. The tongue can determine what is sour, salty, sweet, and bitter; the tongue and not the skin plays an important role in classifying food. It has a legislative power, so to speak. Thus, sweet tastes can be

defined singularly by the tongue. If one applies a sweet substance to any other part of the body it would not produce any impact, as the chili does. Thus, for those who eat something sweet, it would be the chili that would decide the taste, and for those who use chili as staple food it is the sweet that would decide the taste.

In the Indian context, chili forms the basic ingredient in the daily meals of the toiling masses (if they are fortunate to eat regularly). Sweet items make only a guest appearance in the daily meals of these poor masses. These masses prepare sweet food only on the special occasions, i.e. some important festivals. Salt and onion are the other two ingredients that accompany chili in the daily meals of the poor, but it is not the chili or the spices that define the taste, even for the poor (these are poor Other Backward Caste¹⁰ peasants and the laboring masses). Ironically, in the perception of the toiling millions, it is the sweet that defines the taste. This is clear from their own admission of evaluation of the spicy recipe that they use in cooking food. When someone poor asks another poor person about what a preparation tastes like, they invariably answer, for example, in Marathi, "*lai god zala*" (it has become quite nice by sweet). Mind you! This is the hot spicy cooked food. One would have expected them to name it as "*Lai Khamang*" or "*Zanzanit zala*" (it has become really hot and spicy). However, it is the element of deprivation that has bearing on the idea of taste as far as the poor toiling masses are concerned. This has been the perception of even the tribal communities. For example, in one of the important Marathi movies, "*Jait Re Jait*," a Brahmin priest asks the tribal group not to eat rat as it is the carrier of Lord Ganesha. The tribal hero in

¹⁰ These are mostly the peasants castes which once upon a time were the service and artisan caste in the jajmani system in the village economy during the feudal period.

the movie does not initially agree with this proposal and says the taste of a rat is simply superb, it is very sweet (*Undir lai goad lagato*). Thus sweet flavors have a hegemonic presence in the cultural practices of the poor. In addition to sweet, which serves as the major criterion for deciding the taste, there are two additional factors that have bearing on the definition of taste. These are fresh cooked food and not *Jhootan*. For obvious reasons, leftover or rotten food cannot provide a defining criterion for taste. Since the taste carries some kind of authenticity with itself, it can be concretely realized or enjoyed only through eating food which is cooked fresh. Dalit families which had hold over *watan* (feudal rights given to Dalits by the local political power) hardly ever cooked fresh food at home. From here one can then argue that the Dalits started defining taste only after they stopped eating rotten food and the flesh of dead cattle and began cooking fresh meals. Why did they stop eating the meat of dead cattle? It was because consuming this food folded them into what could be called a "Savage Identity." Let me explain this further by citing the debate that took place between the scholars from the Mahar community and the scholars from the Brahmins caste of Maharashtra.

I will begin with the assertion that food, particularly cooked food, is related not simply to taste and hunger but, more importantly, it provides a decisive criterion for the construction of a cultural identity. In other words, cooked food or food practices provide cultural criteria in assigning cultural identity to a certain social section in the society. Thus, in the common perception of the subaltern, particularly the Dalits, preparation of sweets of a different form, like Shreekhand, *Puri* and *Deshi Ghee*, came to be exclusively associated with the Brahmins, particularly during the Peshwa period in nineteenth-

century Maharashtra.¹¹ This is not to suggest that the upper castes are completely averse to eating non-vegetarian. As is well known, the Kashmiri Pandits have recipes for cooking goat meat in so many different ways, and the Bengali Bhadrалоке¹² eat fish, which is called sea vegetarian food. However, these food habits are an affirmation of cultural identity. This is because these are followed by the people from the lower caste. This imitation of the recipes and the food-related cultural practices of one's social superiors is called "sanskritization," a concept coined by M.N. Srinivas, one of the leading social anthropologists from India.

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* and the meat of dead cattle were prescribed to the Untouchables as their staple foods.¹³ The question that needs to be answered is why did the Untouchables eat the meat of dead cattle? Also, how did the other castes survive during the acute famine situation? Did they not eat dead cattle? The distribution of livelihood resources that came to be strictly organized around the watertight compartmentalization of India into caste groups pushed Untouchables completely outside the domain of distribution. The Untouchables were at the receiving end of the discarded resources; the *Jhootan*, cast off cloth, and dead cattle. The irony is that the Untouchables produced food grain but were denied the legitimate share of it. They got only the inferior part of this product (coarse grain, grain gleaned out of cow dung, *Jhootan*, and cast-off clothes).

¹¹ This cultural history has been commonly accepted by the historians who worked on Maharashtra. Eleanor Zelliот's work could be cited as the relevant work in this regard.

¹² These are the upper caste from Bengal.

¹³ Manu's Dharmik code

However, during difficult times, the Untouchables were forced to depend on whatever resources were available to them, and the meat of dead cattle was easily available to them even in tough times. They dried the meat and stored it in their little shanty huts; during the rainy season, they dried the meat by loading it on a rope which extended from one end of a Dalit hut or house to the other. This was called *Chanyanche Toran* in the Dalit vocabulary. The practice of drying meat during the rainy season often put the members of Untouchable households in grave risk because the meat drew snakes and sometimes even tigers from a near by jungle into the house.

The meat of dead cattle not only helped Untouchables survive during difficult times, but it was also used by some Mahar families to arrange preference in the matrimonial relations within the Untouchable's community. Today it would be quite astonishing to acknowledge that, even as recently as 70 years ago, the Mahars from Maharashtra used the meat of dead cattle as the active consideration for marrying a girl into a household that held a greater share.¹⁴ In the Mahar caste, parents would consider it to be a fortune and a privilege to marry their daughter into a Mahar family with a greater share of such meat. Thus, the meat of dead cattle has a moral significance for Untouchables. But the Untouchable in Maharashtra did not stick to this resource just because it had moral significance.

In the cultural history of Dalits in Maharashtra, the meat of dead cattle served as the "dowry" within the Dalit household. However, the Mahars lost this source of dowry as they gave up eating the meat of dead cattle. They, however, do not have regret for this

¹⁴ Baby Kamble, Trans. Maya Pandit, *We have smashed the Prison*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 2008.

loss. Led by Bhimrao Ambedkar, they discovered a morally higher value in giving it up in favor of dignity and self-respect. Their food pattern underwent a radical shift, moving from *Murdada* (meat abstracted from dead cattle) through *Hatfatka* (meat acquired through hunting) to *Toliv* (the meat of a slaughtered animal). Most of the Dalits in India eat beef. Even if they have given up eating the meat of dead cattle, their cultural identity seems to be permanently attached to this food. Some of the leading thinkers and the leaders of modern Maharashtra trace the genealogy of Mahar identity to the meat of dead cattle. I would like to argue in the following pages that cooked food is not politically neutral. On the contrary, it has a very strong political undertone. Politics built around the notion of food necessarily operates within the double configuration of power, local and national.

Certain attempts to associate one social group – in the present case, the Mahars of Maharashtra – with the meat of dead cattle are influenced by the need to retain the hegemonic claim over regionalism as well as nationalism. This claim is necessarily mediated through invocation of association of a certain caste with certain kinds of food. Claims of broader cultural identity through this mediation are maintained for sustaining the totality of social dominance by perpetuating hierarchies through this cultural prescription. Let me offer an illustration from Maharashtra. One set of scholars used food as the marker of the socio-cultural identity of a particular group. These scholars argued that the Mahars became Mahars because they were *Mrutahari* (those who eat dead animals).¹⁵ For example, some scholars constructed the cultural identity of the

¹⁵ Bharatiya Sanskritik Kosh. Ed, Mahadeo Shastri Joshi, published by Bharatiys sanskritik Kosh, Pune, 1972. p. 190

Maharas just because they ate meat of dead cattle.¹⁶ This, in effect, assigned an ascending sense of contempt and repulsion for the Mahars. In addition to this, the upper-caste perception also traces the Mahar identity to their food eating habits. Thus, according to this understanding, Mahars are those who are *Maha-ahari*, meaning those who are mighty eaters.¹⁷ By implication, sweet connotes an ascending sense of social superiority to the sweet consumer who is by and large the top of the twice born in India. As it has been argued by scholars from the Mahar caste, “this particular interpretation of food which sought to construct Mahar into what could be called a ‘Savage Identity’ was provided by the upper caste scholars with the intention to counter the more positive construction of Mahar Identity.”¹⁸ According to some of the leading Non-Brahmin thinkers, such as Jotirao Phule and V.R. Shinde, the Mahars were not *Mrut-Aahari* (as Brahminical scholarship would like to see it) but *Maha-ari* (the great enemy).¹⁹ However, using food for freezing some social sections into a cultural box is not specific to Maharashtra. In fact, non-vegetarian food is also used by the upper caste from other parts of the country to construct the “Savage Identity.” Thus, in parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, a section of the so-called Untouchables is called *Musahari* (the rat eaters).²⁰

As against this Dalit food culture, *Sreekhand* (sweet from Maharashtra) and other kinds of vegetarian food practices automatically confer on the upper caste a civilized identity as vegetarians, who are by and large non-Dalits.²¹ In addition to this, the sweet is also projected as representing the total food culture of not only a region but entire country.

¹⁶ Quoted in Shankarao Kharat, and also in Bharatiya Sanskritik kosh..

¹⁷ Op, cit, Mahadeo Shastri Joshi.

¹⁸ Shankarao Kharat, Maharashtraatil Maharancha Itihas, Sugawa, Pune, 1987.

¹⁹ V.R. Shinde, Bharatatil Ashprush prashna.

²⁰ My own survey of the Musahar of Motihari District and Maharajganj in UP.

²¹ In the Goa Seminar a person from Kerala actually said this.

That is to say, attempts have been made to associate vegetarianism with nationalism.²² For example, one often comes across people projecting vegetarian food (mostly sweet like *Sreekhand*) as the only food practice representing the whole of Maharashtra.²³ They not only use *Sreekhand* to maintain the caste or status hierarchy, but this sweet is also available to them for humiliating those who do not have the experience of tasting it. In such situations, they are quite vulnerable to humiliation. *Shreekhand* is the source of humiliation because, in terms of its color and thin substance, it has a deceptive capacity to resemble *Pithala* (a paste made out of the gram flower and cooked in a much diluted form). A person who is unable to make out the difference between *shreekhand* and *pithala* is likely to become an object of ridicule. This happens in the collective feast where those who are not familiar with *shreekhand* can often face humiliation.²⁴ However, the subaltern Dalits contest this universalist claim of vegetarian food and seek to undercut its significance by reaffirming their food as an alternative culture of the region. This contestation happens within the local configuration of cultural power.

Within the local configuration of power, this homogenous notion of Indian *Thali*, which is defined in terms of its elaborate nature, with sweet dominating it, came to be deeply contested particularly by the Dalits. Dalits use non-vegetarian food as a potent source to counter the nationalist construction of Indian *Thali*. Let us see how the Dalits have used non-vegetarian food, particularly beef, as a powerful cultural medium to undercut the culturally superior status of the upper castes, which seek to chain the Dalits to a “Savage Identity.” This cultural contestation has been very much present in the cultural politics

²² The hindu nationalist attribute to Anandibai Joshi. In fact she was very particular in observing the ‘Indian’ tradition.

²³ In Kolkatta Maharashtra Mandal One finds such kind of claim.

²⁴ One of the Maratha public intellectual shared this information in 1982, at Kolhapur.

of the Dalits in Maharashtra. This contestation is articulated through the folk literature of Dalits from this region. Here is an example of a folk song, sung mostly by Dalit women:

*Pati bhar Laddu Kai kamache , wati bhar pahije Matan,"
ani wati bhar matana sathi zurate man na ho;
Bajar chya divashi matan nasel tar kasa divas legato Bhanbhan"
An wati bhar matana sathi zurate man na ho.²⁵*

This folk song suggests a cultural scenario involving a sharp divide between two contrasting notions of food. In one sense, a Dalit woman is claiming the superiority of non-vegetarian food (beef) over the vegetarian food (sweet laddoos) that is generally associated with upper-caste food practices in the majority of India. This affirmation of beef over sweets became significant when the upper caste used beef to push the Dalit beyond the pale of "civilized society." A Dalit woman, in her attempts to weigh beef higher than sweets, asserts that a basket full of laddoos cannot be a cultural substitute for even a quarter plate of beef. It is within the same framework that Dalits are seeking to politicize their own food practices as superior to the food practices of the twice-born. They try to resignify what is downgraded or looked down upon as filthy. Within the range of the cultural tastes of Dalits, even goat meat is considered inferior to beef. In the Dalit aesthetic, both goat meat and chicken meat are rather bland and lack real authentic tastes. They, unlike the Western perception,²⁶ do not associate red meat with masculinity, as it is consumed by both males and females from the Dalit community. Of course, within the Dalit community, the pattern of consumption tilts more in favor of a male than a female. In the Dalit community, apart from the fact that it is cheap, the

²⁵ This is popular in parts of Maharashtra, particularly three districts, Akola, Amaravati, Yeotmal and Buldhana Districts of the Vidarbha region of the state. Gopal Guru, *Dalit Cultural Politics in Maharashtra*, in ed, Ghanshyam Shah, *Political identity of Dalits*, Sage, New Delhi, 2000.

²⁶ Op, cit Curtin, p13.

preference for beef is also to be understood not in terms of developing a consuming body but more importantly feeding the earning body. Secondly, Dalits also make this judgment in favor of beef because it has a rough and tough texture and the fiber that other varieties of meat lack. Even for Dalits, eating red meat involves the consideration of nutrition.

Interestingly, beef is also available to those who are interested in reversing the social hierarchy by using beef as a criterion for social transformation. In India, some interested social activists have used beef as the standard by which to measure the radicalism of a person. To put it simply, in the perception of such social activists, beef eating serves an important criterion for proving one's social radicalism. Such attempts and thinking do have a symbolic significance, particularly in the following context. Beef eating acquires significance in the religious context which has been central in the public life of India. In such a context, beef eating has been considered a social taboo, particularly after the Brahmins stopped eating beef. In politics, when the Hindutva suggest that Dalits should not eat beef, it also assumes importance. This appeal against eating beef was visible in the campaign that was carried out by the Arya Samaj. Hindu Mahasabha, Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya tried to teach Dalits that they should not eat beef. Thus, beef eating has come to be associated with a kind of politics which may not be sufficiently convincing as far as total Dalit emancipation is concerned. When beef eating married with politics is worked out as the standard of maintaining social hierarchy even among the sub-castes of Dalits,²⁷ then pushing beef into the service of

²⁷ Rao sahib Kasbe in the Pune seminar, said he could not become decaste because he could not eat beef prepared by a Mating.

radicalism is justifiable. And yet it could not be termed as the sufficient condition for evaluating someone's radicalism. This is because these efforts or intentions, howsoever laudable, look like an oversimplified method of converting someone from being conservative to radical. One cannot conclude that beef eating is a sufficient condition for being progressive and radical. If that were the case then we would not have had conservative thinkers like F.A. Hayake and Sir Karl Popper, to name the few, and the all time problematic statesman like Hitler particularly from the west. Conversely, we would not have had critical thinkers from among the "vegetarian east." The Buddha and, in modern times, Mahtma Gandhi could be cited as the significant examples in this regard. As we shall see immediately in the following lines, Buddha by preference was a vegetarian but by compulsion he may not be one. Also, such recommendations look weak as they lack analytical strength and backing. To put it differently, such efforts assign naturalness to radicalism. According to this logic, those who are beef eaters are automatically radical. We have already mentioned that it is not the case. And those who do not eat beef are automatically conservative or orthodox. Is this the case? If cultural consciousness emanating from and shaped by beef eating was the sure guarantee to access radicalism, Buddha would never pass the test of such beef fundamentalists. Buddha was radical not by choice but by very existential fate. As we all know, he avoided making choices in terms of food. And, ultimately, it became the cause of his *Mahaparinirvana*. Buddhist ethics ruled out any cultural coercion that basically emanates from such painful choices. In this sense Buddha was not a pragmatist. He did not suggest using some thing as a means to achieve some end. It is possible to hold a radical position even without eating beef. Conversely, it is quite possible to take a most rabidly conservative position while eating beef. In this case, it is an affirmation of beef.

However, within the cultural universe of Dalits, the Dalit middle class seems to have moved in two major directions: sanskritization and globalization. In a sociological context, which was tightly organized around the ideology of purity pollution, food played an important role in rendering a large section of people, Untouchables, unseeable and unapproachable. Cooked food acquires distinction as it carries a different and potent meaning. In fact the significant part of social interaction is governed by the food. The power relationship is mediated through the restriction on food. Needless to say, food, when articulated through the ideology of purity pollution, creates social and ritual hierarchies that might appear to be completely absurd to some rational minds. I do not want to labor on this point, for it has been widely discussed in socio-anthropological literature in India and on India. However, the question of food and food-related discrimination is not simply the question of seeking amusement through offering an anthropological description of the food, including Dalit food,²⁸ but it raises a much more fundamental question of human dignity. We have seen in the above section that Indian social conditions relate food to Dalits only in a negative sense and not in an affirmative sense. These conditions have also changed over a period of time, leading to a kind of sanskritization of Dalits who now can afford to cook sweet dishes in their homes. The shift to sweet, however, is more out of social compulsion than of compulsion of the stomach. The Dalit would like to continue to be non-vegetarian, particularly with fish, but cannot do it.²⁹ Cultural suppression or the suppression suggesting an inability to eat the food that one likes has to be understood in terms of compulsion. Maybe these Dalits reside in the upper caste locality and hence have to switch over to sweet just to

²⁸ RS Khare,

²⁹ Pawar, Urmila, *Aydan* (marathi autobiography) , Grantahli, Mumbai, 2005.

keep the upper caste suspicion and wrath at bay and gain some freedom from anxiety. But this choice still falls within the same asymmetrical framework where the Dalits are imitating somebody's food culture and thus deviating from their authentic taste for beef. Let me then deal with the conditions within which the choice of food guarantees both taste and dignity. What is this condition? Some of them might suggest, without any hesitation, "globalization" as such a condition which has the possibility of providing taste and dignity to Dalits.

In fact, some one might argue that, the Dalits have made a progressive move from sweet and beef to a range of tastes provided by globalization. Now they have a wider choice to select fast food like McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, as well as ethnic foods like Chinese, Mexican, or Thai. It could be further argued that Dalits are enjoying the "double taste," so to speak, in the age of globalization; one for the tongue (cooked food) and the other for the heart (music). One from the global food and another from the music that is being played while one is dining in a big restaurant in metropolitan areas. There is an aesthetic dimension to food as well. For example, in the urban centers music is played so as to create a pleasant ambiance so that one is not condemned to eat food with melancholy. Some of the pro-modern, and therefore pro-global, might even justify it on the ground that it is offering Dalits an opportunity to see themselves in the reverse role that they had to play during the feudal period. During the feudal period, Dalits were forced to use musical instruments, either a drum in northern India or *halgi* in the south or the *Ghungarachi Kathi* (baton with the bells on top) in the west, not so much to entertain the village lord, while he was eating, but to issue a gentle and melodious

warning to the lord so that he could either delay or conclude his evening meals.³⁰ The entry of a Dalit was considered as dangerous, particularly at the sacred time when the upper castes, the Brahmins, were taking their food. Taking food in the evening was considered as the most sacred and auspicious event in the cultural life of the village Pandit. The presence of the Untouchable within the vicinity of the village around this auspicious time, therefore, was considered as polluting and hence undesirable. The purpose of this music was to announce their arrival in the village so that the upper caste could organize their sacred meals accordingly. The music was played in order to ensure the well being of the upper castes. The *sandhy* is less for feeding one's belly and more for creating harmony between the spiritual and the material through these performative rituals. Dalit music has a function to avoid any polluting interruption produced by the very presence of the Untouchables. In this regard, it is necessary to mention that in a wider perspective, the music being played at the time of dining may not be to invoke either pleasure or avoid the repulsion, but it could be an undesirable source of disgust.³¹ Just imagine a musician in the restaurant playing a romantic tune in front of a person with a broken heart.

It could be argued that cultural globalization arrives at a time of temptation for the Dalits. They now are free to choose their food and have a right to variety of food both raw as well as cooked in restaurants. This right is significant in the context of when Dalits had no choice in terms of food. They survived on left-over food that was given to them by their local patrons. The Dalits always considered this *Jhootan* as the "poison

³⁰ Babi tai Kamble,

³¹ I thank Juliana Di Giustini for sharing this information with me.

bread,” as one Dalit literary writer sought to define Dalit food during the feudal period. If the society is equally rotten and decomposed like the food that gave only negative right to Dalits, in such a situation one might endorse the rational capacity of Dalits to choose the food of their taste and liking. Some Dalits might find McDonald’s much more liberating as against the poison bread or *Jhootan*. Thus, the right to choose food has a definite solution to this decomposition. While right to good food and quality food is desirable and could be defended in the context of the poison bread, however, it would not be possible to defend the free choice on moral ground. Why?

There are tragic reasons as well as logical reasons that can explain the problems in enjoying free choice in regards to choosing food. Let me begin with a dramatic argument: choice in food has a tragic side as far as Dalits are concerned. Some Dalits can afford to eat food of their choice, and yet they are not able to exercise their choice over food. This is because they are still embedded in the community of the poor and hungry lot. Ironically, they have the material capacity to buy quality food from the open market but they have no moral capacity to exercise this capacity. The politics of memory has completely destroyed their physical capacity that they could exercise for enjoying different kinds of food. Their physical capacity has also been seriously damaged by poverty and hunger that they suffered in the past. In the cultural present, the contradiction between tongue and stomach has become quite intense. That is to say, whatever is preferred by the tongue is rejected by the stomach and whatever is approved by the stomach is rejected by the tongue. Earlier, the Dalits, like other poor, could digest even stone when they were not getting *Chirmure*, roasted rice or Indian popcorn. Now they can get *Chirmure* but they cannot digest even such soft stuff like *Chirmure*. Their

digestive system has become so weak that they cannot enjoy this food. In this context, the notion of “capacity building” acquires a different meaning altogether. When one thinks of capacity building purely from an individualist point of view then one finds that the material capacity militates against the physical capacity leading to cultural frustration. Thus, poverty has a function to create a cultural contradiction between two conditions: willing to taste the food but unable to taste it. This is not to suggest that the rich do not experience this contradiction. But there is one crucial difference between the two cases. The contradiction implicating Dalits is structurally rooted; to the extent that they have scarcity in taste because the history of starvation or half starvation has put their digestive system out of gear. In case of the rich it is psychologically sustained. The rich has to sacrifice taste because of its excess at the earlier instance.

In globalization, some well-to-do Dalits can afford to eat “quality” food. However, the moral embedded Dalit self would resolutely desist from enjoying this freedom to choose and eat food. This is because this self finds itself crushed under the moral burden of the counter memory of starvation. Counter memory involves a kind of confinement to one’s past experience. Memory is a subtle but incarcerating restriction on our freedom. In the case of Dalits, and I am sure the other starving social sections, the history of deprivation and starvation would create this restriction on Dalits who then would find it morally difficult to enjoy the food. Most of the Dalits would withdraw from enjoying food that is cooked in their homes on an important occasion except for the 14th of April.³² In rural Maharashtra, some of the Dalit men and women start crying at the time of eating food that is so laboriously cooked by women. They cry because this food summons their

³² This is Ambedkar’s Birth anniversary day.

difficult past into cultural present. They refuse to forget the past. Most of the Dalit women find this a punishment because they want to enjoy the food. Also through memory we become bound to a set of moral obligations, the forgetting of which sanction a possible punishment. This sense of punishment is often expressed in the reaction of Dalit middle class families.

In the above section we have seen that Dalits produced music so as to create a spiritual context for the village *Pandit*, who then could finish his sacred job of eating without the fear of Untouchables. Now Dalits do not produce music but are the beneficiary of modern/secular music being played at eating establishments studded with celebrities. But at the same time, one cannot ignore the music that the Dalit women produce in their houses. This music is different from the music played in five-star hotels. It is different both in terms of purpose and instrumentalities. It is different in purpose in the sense that, while music played in hotels is pleasant commentary on the surplus food, music played by Dalit women is the sad statement on scarcity of food. Let me explain this by citing a common situation that exists in the everyday experience of a half-starving family.

In such households, inviting guests for food is a rare occasion. But one has to invite guests on some occasion. Most of the time, these guests go on an eating binge and upset the cooking calculation of Dalit women. Decency demands that these women communicate the situation to the guest in such a way that they understand. In this regard, it is also interesting to note that Dalit women also produce music by playing metallic cooking vessels. They create a loud sound by beating a pan. As we all know a

vessel full of preparations does not create noise, it is the nearly empty pan that creates a noise. This music of the vessels thus is different from the music of malls, mountains, deserts, and the sea.

The Dalits, particularly from Maharashtra, used cooking vessels/pans with strict ritual hierarchy. For example, Dalits used clay pots for cooking the meat of dead cattle, aluminum vessels for *toliv* (beef) and steel vessels for cooking chicken and lamb. Dalit women took particular care in not mixing these vessels. They were kept separate. The clay pots were kept right outside the house. Thus, the Dalit did internalize the hierarchical framework that was devised by the Hindu Dharma Shastra. The notion of hierarchy was quite continuous across social situations in India. The globalized/modernized Dalits have gotten rid of this hierarchy. In the globalized Dalit houses, sophisticated cooking instruments have not only replaced clay pots, but they have also compressed the time of cooking. (Maggie *bus Do Minutes*). Most importantly, new kitchen wares like the dishwasher have effectively destroyed this hierarchy. Modernizing Dalits now can claim that kitchen technology in their houses has destroyed the vessel hierarchy. However, in this regard, it has to be kept in mind that vessel-related hierarchy is not specific to Indian Dalits only. In fact, in different cultural food-related traditions and practices one can find hierarchy associated with vessels. For example, in Jewish dietary laws, a pan used to fry a hamburger or a pot used to make stew becomes *felishing* (not usable). A bowl previously used for chicken soup cannot be used for ice cream.³³

³³ <http://www.religionfacts.com/judaism/practices/kosher.htm>.

However, the introduction of technology in the kitchen has replaced the entire process into regression. These machines no more reflect or dispel the deductive smell of the spice preparation. This is because the food is not cooked but produced through a machine. In the changing context of the kitchen, the modern kitchen with modern technology introduces a different kind of hierarchy, which is ultimately shaped by the overall social hierarchy that continues to exist even in the urban context. For example, stainless steel vessels are treated with some difference. These vessels are not used for cooking meat. For cooking beef, either metal or clay pots are used. Of course, the urban health-conscious rich people would use earthen pots for the organic method and to achieve the exotic taste of the food. They would use the non-stick pans for cooking the food in the urban centers.

Finally, in cultural globalization, from among the vast mass of the Dalit population it is only a microscopic section that can enjoy the recipe offered by this aspect of globalization. The rest of the Dalits do not, in actuality, get the chance of enjoying global food. Those who feel deprived of this cultural taste, therefore, derive subsidized satisfaction in the local food practices. Thus, those Dalits who cannot get chewing gum, find an appropriate replacement in local chewing gum: *Chun Chunaya*.³⁴ The question that one needs to ask is, should one hunt or aspire for global taste? If yes, then should s/he wait until everyone gets the real taste of the global product? Should not the Dalit

³⁴ These are small pieces of chewing gum size, made out of the fat of cow or Buffalo fat. Dalit children chew them like chewing gum. They are tastier than chewing gum which has a different purpose altogether. Chewing gum is aimed at fighting foul breath and maintaining the health the gums. The late Arun Kale, a Dalit poet, ironically calls *Chuncunay* the local replacement for chewing gum.

follow the moral philosophy of *Tathagata* from the Buddhist philosophy or altruism from the western philosophical tradition?³⁵

³⁵ Lisa M. Heldke, *Food Politics, Political Food*, in ed, Deane w. Curtin and Lisa M.Heldke, *Cooking, Eating, Thinking, Transformative Philosophy of Food*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis. p. 303.

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