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READING THE CONNOTATIONS OF FOOD RITUALS IN BABY KAMBLE'S *THE PRISONS WE BROKE*

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Abstract:

Food practices in the form of rituals serve to be cultural markers as they all reflect in some way an element of that culture's values and common story—whether long inherited or deliberately chosen. These rituals vary to a great extent from one culture to another based on differences in caste, region, and religion. Thus, penetrating the social set up, the food rituals attain various connotations. Food laws, such as taboos, are imposed on consumption of certain food items that are often religion specific. KT Achaya observes that "All lower castes could receive cooked food or water from a Brahmin, but higher caste would on no account receive cooked food from lower ones" (63). Accordingly, food becomes an important tool to divide people based on caste. Achaya's observation hints that the upper castes enjoy greater privileges in matters related to food. Food consumption has cultural and political dimensions where food habits exert influence on power structures and social hierarchies. Food becomes a strong bond between the members of a same religion and a great divide between members belonging to other religions. In short, it can be said, food tends to 'divide and rule' people based on religion and caste. In India food is mainly speculated in terms of caste, dividing people based on purity and pollution. The food of the upper castes is considered pure while that of the lower castes as polluted. Reading Baby Kamble's autobiography, the paper argues how food of the lower castes is mainly connotated through negativity.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, is an autobiographical account of the socio-cultural positioning of Dalits, which is governed mainly by specific food practices. The present study argues that the Dalit food practices, as framed in Hinduism, are imposed on them to uphold caste hierarchy and to practice discrimination against them. Gopal Guru states that, "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" (11). The Dalits belonging to the lower caste, followed the practice of eating dead cattle as prescribed by the upper castes and were subjected to utmost humiliation by the upper castes. Food, when present, is always a scarcity, in a Dalit's life. Baby Kamble brings out the sad saga of the sufferings of the marginalised Dalits and renders a heart wrenching tale of the sufferings of the Dalits in her *The Prisons We Broke*.

In their essay, "The Anthropology of Food and Eating", Mitz and Du Bois, agree that, "Like all culturally defined material substances used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, food serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart" (109). While food unites members who follow similar food practices, food divides people when food practices are different. It may be said that food plays an important role in the process of othering people. This aspect of food gains a prominent mention in Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* through various practices in the form of food rituals. The rituals as described by Kamble, unites people of Mahar community while it distances them from the upper castes. Food practices and the food rituals of the Mahar community becomes an important tool for the upper castes to discriminate the mahar community. The Mahars consider the month of Ashadh as a beneficial one. This month is an antidote for the Mahars who belong to the lower caste, as it is a means

to endure every misery in their life. It is considered as a month that allows them some food. "The month is a blessing for their starved bodies— when the tongue is satiated with the taste it loves" (12) states Kamble. Many food related rituals are performed during this month. It is the women, who enjoy this month of the year to a great extent. They clean their houses with cow or buffalo dung and are preoccupied with the preparations for the whole month. Married women, whose husbands are alive, have great work on Tuesdays and Fridays of Ashadh. The sasus invite daughters-in-law from other families to dine with them. For this, daughters-in-law of the host family must put in a lot of effort to keep ready everything. Women of the Mahar community may be said to be doubly marginalised, because of their caste and by the men of the Mahar community. The in-laws see this ritual of inviting others' daughters-in-law as an opportunity to trouble their own. Sweet dishes made from wheat flour and jiggery would be served on this occasion and many women would get possessed during this ritual. The possessed woman dances to her heart's content along with potraja. The possessed woman is treated with reverence by everyone including her family members (21-22). This act may be read as one in which, the possessed women also see an opportunity to exert her influence and establish her supremacy over other women and men as well, as this is the only chance, she gets to dominate men. This opportunity might be seen as a momentary respite for the possessed woman to do away with her hunger, as she would be fed all that she demands. When she is possessed, she can also momentarily enjoy powers, which she is otherwise devoid of. Though a superstition, people believe that the one who is possessed is God. They are ready to do anything that the possessed woman orders them to. While the possessed woman is served, the daughters-in law worry anxiously whether any food would be left for them. The sad plight of the Mahar women, where they have to resort to superstitions as these, is woefully described by Kamble.

The four weeks of Ashadh is meant for the Mahar community to share food. "The entire village flock to the temple with varied dishes as offering to goddess — "fried delicacies, curd rice, bhajis cooked with choice spices and kurwadya... This food is then divided, for distribution among the Mahars in keeping with their status and honour" (29). Hierarchy and power structure play a significant role within the Mahar community in division of food. Once distributed, it is again, the men and children who receive the lion share of the food. The daughters-in-law just helplessly wait for their turn to get their share of food. If the upper castes wield power over the Mahar men, the Mahar men and mothers-in law wield power over the Mahar daughters-in-law.

Another important ritual followed by the Mahars is the Rede jatra or the buffalo fair, where the buffalo is sacrificed to the deity and is then shared among the members of the Mahar community, based on hierarchy. The buffalo fair is a memory for the Mahar community, as even to this day, if big pieces of meat are found in a meal, it is thought to belong to the buffalo fair (34). For the Mahars, who, lived on the periphery of the village, in dirt pits and lead a miserable life, discarded by the society, the buffalo fair brought both food and joy. Waiting for the fair in the year to follow, the Mahars kept alive their hopes to live, as this fair promised them some food, giving them a little respite from their wretched lives (35).

Sharing her reflections on the festival of Nagpanchami, Kamble recollects how Ganpat dada mixes left over chapattis with the nag narsoba kneaded with mud instead of jaggery and eats the same. Such, she claims is the condition of her people. She blames the people of the high caste for having them reduced to a bestial state. She explains that they lived a life worse than the bullocks, as bullocks that slogged for their masters ate grass and lived in their master's courtyard, but the Mahars were fed leftovers and lived in garbage pits, where everyone threw away their wastes (49). With utmost pain, Kamble shares the sad saga of their community being reduced to the state of animals.

Another ritual called Pachvi would be performed to feed a mother after the fifth day of her

childbirth, where an animal would be killed, if it was not available and some organs would be fed to the mother (61). Eating meat of the dead animals had become so inseparable from the Mahars that, even if they did not get a dead animal, they would kill an animal and eat it. Thus, the upper castes had strongly imposed food practices on the Mahar community. Gopal Guru in his essay, "Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies" mentions Kamble to state that the share of the dead animal was considered 'dowry' to marry off a girl into the Mahar house (12). Dead cattle had become integral to the Mahar community to the extent that it was seen as an advantage to get a Mahar girl married into a house that had more share of it, letting aside the other considerations of a marriage. Living in conditions of extreme poverty, getting hardly a square meal a day, the Mahars even "considered animal epidemics like diphtheria or dysentery a boon" (85). Kamble recollects the horrible experience of how even the foul-smelling animals that were putrid, filled with puss and infested with maggots were considered safe to consume after cutting off the infected parts. The Mahars made a living amidst such horrifying conditions.

Food, for the Mahars became their identity, more than the basic essential of life. The upper castes not only dictated the food practices of Mahars, the upper castes also attributed the status of untouchables to the Mahars because they ate the meat of dead animals. Guru states that, using food as the marker of socio-cultural identity of a particular group, "one set of scholars argued that the Mahars became Mahars because they were Mrutahari(those who eat dead animals)" (13). It would be interesting to note that the same upper who dictated the food practices for the Mahars humiliated them because of food. Further Guru states that "According to some of the leading Non-Brahmin thinkers, such as Jotirao Phule and V.R. Shinde, the Mahars were not Mrut- Aahari but Maha- ari (the great enemy)" (14). Thus, the Mahars were viewed by caste Hindus, as the lower castes, especially because of their food practices. In a sense, it can be said that food stands out as an identity marker for caste.

The Prisons We Broke brings out the harsh realities of the Mahars' struggle for food. Kamble expresses that the Mahars seek liberty by changing their food practices. She thanks Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, whom she considers the architect of their future, because of whom the Mahar community is influenced to give up eating the meat of dead cattle. She appeals to the Mahars to be proud of their identity. The changed food rituals brought a change in their political lives too and the Mahars became socially more empowered, as abstaining from certain food practices was a clarion call of educated Mahars, which they used as a tool to promote education and growth of the Mahar community. The bonding between the members of the Mahar community was strengthened as they realised the atrocities of the upper castes towards their own community members mainly because of their food practices. Kamble asserts that it was through Ambedkar's words that the Mahar community got empowered to fight the battle of food. The food which was prescribed to them became the reason for humiliation, ironically by the same people who prescribed them that food. It is said that the Mahars in those days were repulsed by the idea of pig. Kamble recollects how her grandmother "used the idea of pig as a weapon to dissuade Mahars from eating the flesh of dead cattle" (167). Kamble recalls how the upper castes avoided eating their food in the presence of a Mahar who was treated even less than a leper. She happily proclaims that "now the Mahars have transformed themselves from lepers to leopards (Dalit Panther)" (168).

Food rituals of the Mahars were mainly meant to appease their hunger. The entire Mahar community gathered to share food during the month of Ashad. The rituals that circled around food was a means for the people of Mahar community to satiate their hungry stomachs on the pretext of offers to the deity. However, these food rituals though gratified the hunger of the people of the Mahar community, they were pushed to the margins of the social structure because of these food practices. Hence, the paper argues that food for the Mahars was mainly associated with negativity connotated through hunger, insult, poverty, and absence. When present, food never meant anything more than mere sustenance, ironically

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