

# Psychology of Caste in Food: A Letter to My Upper Caste Friend

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## Abstract

In the upper caste imagination, the general notion of caste has mostly been limited to marriage, reservation, and politics. However, the everyday nature of caste often lies in the state of dismissal or un-acknowledgement by the upper caste. This letter is addressed to individuals/ communities who assume the position of upper caste and it aims to ignite conversations with an open mind and heart about the lives of those at the other end of the caste spectrum. A key focus of this letter is on Food—an important aspect of our lives where casteism is blatant and brutal. The letter explores a history of food practices and also addresses how food choices aid in discrimination and social exclusion of communities even in contemporary times. Using a lens of ‘psyche of the oppressor’, we discuss how food practices shapes an upper caste individual’s psyche along the factors of delusion of caste superiority, socially favored caste behavior and intergenerational transmission of caste attitudes. The letter does not comment on individual choices or preferences; it rather focuses on the system in which vegetarianism is considered supreme, which facilitates in ignoring the pluralities of the country and thereby pushing the ‘other’ into margins/ peripheries and does not take cognizance of their culture and history.

## Keywords

Caste, food, Brahmin, Psychology, India

## Dear Friend,

I hope this letter finds you well. I think it is time you and I had this conversation, an uncomfortable yet pertinent one. It is a topic we keep sighing away and shrugging off

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because we either think it is a problem that concerns the past century, or it is boring, or our country is not moving past that topic. No, I am not here to talk about reservation but caste itself. That is the mistake we make, too, don't we? We ponder and weigh the strengths and weaknesses of an affirmative action policy introduced to combat the caste system, but we rarely engage with caste in detail.

We feel caste is seen only in marriage, vote bank and reservation, don't we? However, the fact is that caste is present in everything we see, hear, smell and touch. Caste operates in the residential neighborhood we live in, classrooms we studied, in our words, language, tone, and accent, our attires, places and forms of worship, our access to public resources, among our friends, colleagues and so on. The list is endless in which caste molds us knowingly or unknowingly. Our entire life revolves around it, yet we never engage with caste; why is that? It is ironic and baffling that we are consumed by caste but barely acknowledge its presence.

However, here in this letter, I would like to talk to you about one such area where the presence of caste is brutal and gut-wrenching. If we have to walk through a lane of introspection, I would like you to think along with me in the following lines: Why do vast sections of society survive on others' leftover food? How did something as elementary as food decide who is treated as human and who is not? Why are human beings reduced to an extent where they fight with animals for a bare living and survival? Why do people rummage in the garbage to eat half-rotten food? If this was an issue concerning the past, why are the children beaten (to death) for drinking water in schools? (*The Hindu* 2022), Why do they have to purify the well after the Dalits<sup>1</sup> use it? (*The Wire* 2022). The list is painful and endless, but I would like to start by highlighting a few aspects.

## Caste in Food

Just look around us; are we not surrounded by different cuisines, from different cultures to different regions? Why don't you and I come across Dalit cuisine(s)?<sup>2</sup> For the Dalit communities, it is not just flavors, spices and different cooking styles but digesting caste and trauma on a plate. Goody writes that history has never been so blood-soaked and stained with violence as that of caste on a plate. Because these histories of food carry generations of pain and cuisines forged through centuries of oppression. Dalit cuisines are neither popular nor common because mainstream<sup>3</sup> cuisines fail to acknowledge their existence. This is also one of the oldest ways caste thrives, as a tool of invisibility and silencing (Kader n.d.). Despite being consumed by caste, this probably answered our previous question about why we do not engage with caste. The mainstream fails to recognize the Dalit communities' food habits, not only

<sup>1</sup>Dalit implies those who have been broken, ground down, by those above them in an active and a deliberate way (Zelliot 1978).

<sup>2</sup>It refers to the plurality of the cuisines consumed by Dalit communities all over the country.

<sup>3</sup>Considered normal, and having or using ideas, beliefs etc. that are accepted by most people (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

the food that is not acknowledged but also the people and communities. Is it not our collective failure to resonate with the pain of a larger section of society?

Rajyashri's (Goody n.d.) art explores every day and historical instances of Dalit resistance. Her writings capture tracing Dalit writers' memories of food. For examples, *Bhakri*<sup>4</sup> and cactus pods from *Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble (2008). By re-creating these recipes, she hopes to reveal to the reader how deep are the roots of caste, which can be noticed in the simplest activity of drinking water or consuming food. Jahnavi (Uppuleti 2020) writes about roasted winged termites (*Usillu*) as her favorite monsoon snack, a dish relished in the Madiga community- a Dalit community in Telangana which remains hidden from the mainstream narrative.

It is important to know our histories, is it not? Ghurye writes about the rules and regulations for sharing food or drink. He says that castes can be divided into five groups: first, the twice-born castes; second, those castes at whose hands the twice-born can take 'Pakka' food; third, those castes at whose hands the twice-born cannot accept any kind of food but may take water, fourth, castes that are not untouchables yet are such that water from them cannot be used by the twice-born; last, all those castes whose touch defiles not only the twice-born but any orthodox Hindu. All food is divided into two classes, *Kachcha* and *Pakka*, the former being any food in which it has been cooked with water and the latter all food cooked in ghee without the addition of water. As a rule, a man will never eat *Kachcha* food unless it is prepared by fellow caste-men, which means a member of his endogamous group, whether caste or sub-caste or by his Brahmin guru or spiritual guide. A Brahmin cannot accept *kachcha* food from any other caste (Ghurye 1969; Stevenson 1954; Freed 1970).

Did you know that both non-vegetarianism and vegetarianism were shared among all varnas? Sharma writes about how dietary habits are one of the main functions of the caste system. There was not much difference in food habits between ancient Aryans<sup>5</sup> and Anaryans. Later, the same food habits became the major grounds for untouchability. They lost their social prestige when Upanishadic<sup>6</sup> and Buddhist<sup>7</sup> criticism was directed at Brahmin<sup>8</sup> supremacy. On account of this, they began restructuring their social structure to gain lost social prestige. The killing of cows and beef-eating were widespread among all varnas,<sup>9</sup> and Brahmins, the biggest meat eaters, imposed restrictions on these food habits to secure their social prestige. The Sudras<sup>10</sup> were allowed to consume only the flesh of the dead animals, which was later declared

<sup>4</sup>Hand-beaten bread (Sen 2019).

<sup>5</sup>Of or relating to hypothetical ethnic type illustrated by or descended from early speakers of Indo-European languages (Merriam Webster, n.d.).

<sup>6</sup>Philosophical religious texts of Hinduism; also known as *Sanatan Dharma* meaning eternal order or eternal path (World History Encyclopedia 2020).

<sup>7</sup>Someone who practices Buddhism, the religion based on teachings of Buddha (Vocabulary, n.d.).

<sup>8</sup>A Hindu of the highest caste traditionally assigned to priesthood (Merriam Webster, n.d.).

<sup>9</sup>According to Hindu scriptures refers to classification of people based on their qualities (Yogapedia 2023).

<sup>10</sup>A Hindu of lower caste traditionally assigned to menial occupations (Merriam Webster, n.d.)

the most hateful food and ex-communicated from the entire society. The Brahmin was the chief of the society and a priest to the men. He was the ruler of the rulers. Animal sacrifice was compulsory in yajnas,<sup>11</sup> and it was performed at the disposal of Brahmin priests. The meat was distributed among everyone, and a considerable portion was given to the priest. Meat eating was popular among all varnas from the Vedic age to the Sudra period. It is argued that there were butcher houses for killing cows in various places during the Vedic ages. In Vedas, there are examples of cow killing and beef eating. There is a provision for cow killing in Rig Veda for Agni and Indra devas. During the Vedic age, the Kshatriya soldiers wore animal skin. There are mentions of meat consumption in the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Sharma provides evidence with the verses from the mentions found in the above-mentioned holy books. The family who used to do yajna could only obtain a small portion of the animal's flesh. The Brahmin also performed the duty of a butcher. When Buddha came and revolted against the Brahmanical social order, the system of yajnas, and animal sacrifices, it was a massive blow to the social prestige of the Brahmins. King Ashoka banned the killing of animals. The reformation introduced religious texts and banned meat eating to restore the once-lost social prestige. Sudras were banned because their conditions were deplorable and also for the food practices. The only food left at their disposal was the flesh of dead animals (Sharma 2003; Khare 1966; Ambedkar 2009).

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is considered as a stalwart for social justice and the one who worked tirelessly for the emancipation of Dalits. Ambedkar (1948) stated that the Broken Men were Buddhists. They did not revere the Brahmins, did not employ them as their priests, and regarded them as impure. On the other hand, the Brahmin disliked the broken men because they were Buddhist and preached against them with contempt and hatred, resulting in them being regarded as untouchables. If a Brahmin comes in contact with a Buddhist or enters the Buddhist temple, a purificatory bath is advised for the Brahmins as Manu<sup>12</sup> prescribes. The broken men hated the Brahmins because they were enemies of Buddhism, and the Brahmins imposed untouchability on them because they would not leave Buddhism. The roots of untouchability lie in the hatred and contempt that the Brahmins created against those who were Buddhist. Beef eating is considered to be the root cause of untouchability. This divides Hindus into vegetarians and flesh eaters. It also divides Hindus into those who eat cows and those who do not—the Touchables, whether vegetarians or flesh eaters divide on the front of not consuming beef. There is abundant evidence from the scriptures, especially in Rig Veda,<sup>13</sup> suggesting that the Aryans consumed beef. A detailed analysis of the sacrifices involving cows and oxen was laid down, but the description was not restricted to the

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<sup>11</sup>A Hindu ritual that has been performed since ancient times in which Agni Deva, the fire God, acts as a medium between man and the gods. It is performed in front of fire and Vedic mantras are chanted. It is a Sanskrit word meaning worship, sacrifice or offering (Yogapedia 2023).

<sup>12</sup>The progenitor of the human race and giver of religious laws of Manu according to Hindu mythology (Merriam Webster, n.d.)

<sup>13</sup>The foremost and oldest collection of Vedic Sanskrit Hymns (Merriam Webster, n.d.)

sacrifices; it had a detailed analysis of what kind of cows and oxen were sacrificed and to what deities they had to be offered. Ambedkar says that Hindu society is stratified into three sections: One is those who are vegetarian, two, who eat flesh but do not eat cow flesh, and finally, some eat flesh, including cow's flesh. They are classified as Brahmins, non-brahmins and untouchables.

Having walked through the dark alley lanes of history, which are kept hidden, it is important to know why we equate Brahmins to oppressors/historically privileged. They are the epicenter of the caste ecosystem. Thus, communities closer to this epicenter have better social standing than those who do not share the same closeness. Closeness here refers to the services provided to the Brahmins. Madhavan (2003) writes that caste representation and writing culture in the colonial system represent the Brahminical self-perception of caste, which has been made as a frame of reference and incorporated into ethnocentric judgements. The Nairs, who are soldiers, always take arms and serve the king according to his command and will. Their proximity to Brahmins gave them recognition, and the Nairs imitated the rites and customs of the Brahmins.

Moreover, this closeness translated to the physical space that each occupied in the proximity of Brahmins. In the context of Kerala, there were prescribed distances that each person had to follow. For example, a Nayar may approach a Brahmin but must not touch him, a Tiyan must keep a distance of 36 steps from Brahmin and Pulayars, and Parayars must keep a distance of 96 steps from Brahmins (Ghurye 1969). Each community increased their social standing and status based on how close they were to Brahmins, and the greater the distance from Brahmins, the lower the social standing and position occupied in the society. Everything done by the Brahmins was seen as an act of reverence by the rest of the society. The food practices, the attire, ways of worship and so on.

We must ask ourselves an important question, keeping historical and contemporary times in mind: Why were the Brahmins revered so much? Because they were the temple priests, closest to God. Ambedkar stated that every other caste is an imitation of Brahmanism. The psychological interpretation is given in *Castes in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development* (Ambedkar 2020) on why the subcastes were endogamous and self-closed because Brahmins were so. He addressed it as 'the injection of imitation'. The proclivity to imitate is ingrained in the human mind and need not be considered an insufficient explanation for the formation of castes. Ambedkar quotes Walter Bagehot and Gabriel Tarde on how imitation is not a conscious or voluntary process and flows from higher to lower.

The details of Brahmin food are not discussed in this letter. Instead, the mental makeup that the medium of food facilitates in continuing the oppressor's/historically privileged mindset is espoused. Untouchability is best carried out in urban and rural spaces through this powerful yet subtle medium. We have all come across house rental signs boldly inviting 'only vegetarians'. The extent to which everyone else adjusts to accommodate Brahmins or the vegetarian sentiment is high in every social setting. A few examples are announcing prior if containers are non-veg, asking

permission to continue eating if it is not a problem, going to restaurants that only serve vegetarian even if only one member of the group prefers it, teachers and school/college management ordering students not to bring non-vegetarian food to respect the sentiments of vegetarians, and workspaces issuing notices asking employees not to consume non-veg in the office premises (Johari 2014). The list is endless.

Brahmanical hegemony dictates certain practices as the supreme norm, and the rest of the society, who do not belong to the Brahmin community, is expected to follow suit. The question being posed here is, how does that sense of superiority possessed by the oppressor/historically privileged community transcend to the internalization of every non-brahmin caste and religion? Furthermore, how blatantly does the medium of food operate to maintain hegemony in the attitudes and behavior of what one eats?

Drawing on the conceptual framework of the psyche of the oppressor (Sopha & Nair 2023), this framework indicates a few factors, such as delusion of caste superiority, socially favored caste behavior and intergenerational transmission of caste attitudes. The upcoming sections will elaborate on the factors in relation to food and how it contributes to the psyche of the oppressor/ historically privileged.

## Delusion of Caste Superiority

Did you know that Brahmin vegetarianism is a very elastic concept? Dolphijn (2006) writes that in communities living closer to the sea, Kerala and Bengali Brahmins consume fish as part of their diet. Kashmiri Brahmins refrain only from pork and beef; chicken and mutton are mainly considered acceptable. The vegetarian diet of the Brahmins is interpreted as a result of their exclusion from physical labor. Their food was primarily limited to *Saatvik* food. It refers to natural and good food for the soul: food without warm elements such as meat (*Rajasik* food) and poisonous elements like garlic and alcohol (*Tamasik* food). The problem is not with communities having their own food preferences; it becomes problematic only when the historically privileged caste imposes its dietary restrictions on other members. The prevalent Brahmanical hegemony gives them an edge to showcase the kind of universality in concepts of good and bad. They judge not only their own actions but also the actions of other caste groups.

The rules of morality can be seen in the Bhagavad Gita;<sup>14</sup> Ilaiah interprets it as a Brahmanical work. In this, we can see moral regulations on dietary habits. Tasty, rich, substantial food (*saatvik*) is loved by the man of goodness, while pungent, sour, salty heated foods (*rajasik*) are loved by the man of passion. *Tamasik* food is described as spoiled, tasteless, putrid, stale, and filthy and is loved by the man of darkness. *Tamasik* food is also said to cause pain, misery, and sickness. The Brahmin caste defined their *Saatvik* food as good and considered the rest as bad. *Saatvik* food stands at the center of society. At the same time, *Rajasik* and *Tamasik* are pushed to the margins, which translates to the vegetarian menu standing at the center of society. In contrast, the non-vegetarian menu is banished to its peripheries.

<sup>14</sup>Hindu devotional work in a poetic form (Merriam Webster, n.d.)

Similarly, Thomas (2020) calls IISC the Iyer Iyengar Science campus. She states that vegetarianism in India cannot be considered only as a choice and preference because there have been reported cases of discrimination of what one eats and cases reported on the existence of separate wash basins and entrances for vegetarians and non-vegetarians. IISC has three major dining halls (mess): A mess is a pure vegetarian, B mess is for north Indian vegetarians and non-vegetarians, and C mess is for south Indian vegetarians and non-vegetarians. When enquired about the purpose of A mess when B and C mess offered vegetarian food, it was said that ‘A mess is Brahmanical, it is only for Brahmins, A mess is an Agraharam’.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to understand the role that food plays in maintaining the concepts of purity and pollution. Béteille (2011) writes on rather stringent rules for the exchange of food and water among different caste groups. It is said that superior castes gave food to inferior castes but they did not accept from them. It is important to introspect why the restriction was even in place, what does it imply? In ancient and contemporary times, assertion of superiority for a group of people had to be emanated in all their practices through rituals, endogamy, social interaction and exchange of food and water as Ghurye had stated earlier, but down the line, when there is no more threat or one need not try to assert superiority, the food itself became the statement of superiority and anyone who consumed had that status and individuals/communities who differed faced the repercussions too. Guru (2019) provides an example of certain cooked foods and how they create cultural hierarchies within social groups. He gives the example of *Shreekhand*,<sup>16</sup> *Puri* and *Deshi Ghee* came to be exclusively associated with Brahmins by the subaltern/Dalit perception. Chigateri (2008) stated that food hierarchy in India goes from vegetarianism to meat eating (no beef) to beef eating. The superior ethic of vegetarianism is combined with the values of non-violence that continue to frame the discourse around food practices in India.

Thus, we can see how the delusion of caste superiority is maintained alive in food and scriptures, aiding in the continuation of Brahminical hegemony. It adds that it is not about an individual’s choice or preferences. By maintaining vegetarian superiority as a food culture, it continues to ignore the pluralities of the country, push the rest of the communities into the peripheries, and stigmatize them for their culture and history. It also captures how it is carried out in reputed educational institutions.

## **Socially Favored Caste Behavior and Intergenerational Transmission of Caste Attitudes**

Can adherence to a vegetarian diet be a product of conformity? Young children tend to conform rather than confront, even when they are young as two. Researchers Li, Britvan, and Tomasello (2021) write that children are expected to learn the physical and social realities to become functioning members of society. Young children continue to

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<sup>15</sup>Brahmin settlements where houses are lined on either side of the road, one end of the road would be a Shiva temple and the other end would be Vishnu temple (Wikipedia 2023)

<sup>16</sup>An Indian sweet dish of strained Yogurt (Wikipedia 2024)

learn norms, conventions, and rituals for reasons such as identification and affiliation with members of their culture. They are motivated to act conventionally. This explains how human groups can transmit cultural practices over generations. How else will these practices pass down generations and stand the test of time if not for young children not motivated to acquire them? It was found that children conformed more to norms than to preferences. Children protest against transgressors and tattle about transgressors to observers. This indicates that children are committed to upholding norms even above their self-interest. Socially favored behavior translates to unquestioned ideal-orienting behavior. In the case of food habits, an interplay between intergenerational transmission of caste attitudes and socially favored caste behavior is seen at large.

Jingxiong et al. (2007) shows that, for young children, the most influencing factor with respect to eating habits is obtained from their immediate social context, which is their family. The family eating environment includes parents' actual child-feeding practices, their dietary habits, and the beliefs and attitudes they convey verbally. Parental influences can be transmitted directly (through the food served) and indirectly (behavioral models and social norms) to children. Children's food practices are also determined by parents' dietary comments and restrictions employed.

Thorat and Lee (2005) cite the example of a child from a Dalit community who was denied food in a mid-day meal scheme (MMS) because of her background. At the same time, her classmates did not face issues because they were from dominant castes; another instance brought to attention is in the government-run public distribution system (PDS), where shop owners belonging to dominant castes do not distribute goods to customers from Dalit community before a cloth screen is hung out. The localities in which mid-day meals are served regarding village caste geography constitute a vital factor in determining access to children from the Dalit community; if placed in a dominant caste locality, it becomes difficult and threatening. Opposition to cooks from the Dalit community is one of the most common blatant incidents that reminds the country of the cutthroat nature of caste. A few examples include local administrators blocking the hire of cooks from the Dalit community; if cooks have been hired from the said community, then dominant caste parents send the children with lunch boxes, and these same parents pressure the administration to dismiss the cook when these steps do not result in favorable results, such as dominant caste parents' campaign to shut down MMS programme in school. Alternatively, they take steps to withdraw the child from school or admit them to a different school where the cook is not from a Dalit community. What do we understand by this? Is it the parents or children having an issue? If children have an issue, where is it stemming from? This proves the intergenerational transmission of casteist attitudes and how children learn socially favored caste behavior.

## Conclusion

In this letter, I have attempted to walk you through an introspective lane of how caste in food shrouds us regularly. We considered the historical details of *Kachha and*



*Pakka* food and social restriction within caste groups. We saw that beef eating was a widespread practice among all varnas and how it was given up by social elites to regain social prestige. The cow was then used as a symbol of sacredness, worth, and protection. This is very well discussed by Babasaheb Ambedkar and other anti-caste scholars. I hope that after reading this letter, you will continue to have an open heart and mind to read and engage with anti-caste literature, have dialogues and discussions among your friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, and community members and identify areas (food, language, attire, tradition, knowledge production, etc.) in which Brahmanical hegemony is upheld and how we can collectively work towards dismantling the system. I would like to conclude this letter with a translated Telugu poem, ‘Goddu maamsam’ by Digumarthi Suresh Kumar (SMCS channel 2015).

“When its udders were squeezed and milked,

You did not feel any pain at all.

When it was stitched into a chappal, you stamped underfoot and walked,

You did not feel hurt at all.

When it rang as a drum at your marriage and your funeral,

You did not suffer any blows.

When it sated my hunger, beef became your goddess?”.

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