

BOOKS

Memories Are Made of This

**FOOD IN DALIT AND
ADIVASI WRITING**

"THE MANGOES were always eaten slowly, reverently, their juice running down our wrists as though time itself had paused to let us taste happiness," Madhur Jaffrey writes in her memoir, *Climbing the Mango Trees*. In much contemporary feminist life writing, food is bound up with nostalgia: mangoes, meals and kitchens are repositories of affection, patience, familial warmth and childhood. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writing, particularly *The Mistress of Spices*, cooking is a medium through which women navigate memory, migration and emotional survival, and recipes travel across geographies, carrying the weight of longing. Jhumpa Lahiri, too, repeatedly returns to food as intimacy—in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*, meals mark quiet reckonings with displacement, assimilation and the fragile ways love is sustained through ritual and repetition.

Several memoirs by authors from India's marginalised communities read starkly against this mode—where food consoles, and nourishment becomes a metaphor. In them, meals appear stripped of flavour and nostalgia. Food arrives spoiled, rationed or forbidden, and the act of eating itself is often a reminder

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of humiliation rather than a benign symbol of homecoming. Few books show this more directly than Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. First published in Marathi in 1986, it is one of the earliest full-length memoirs by a Dalit woman. The English translation by Maya Pandit makes clear how blunt Kamble's sentences are, how deliberately she avoids lyricism. Even moments of ritual abundance—a buffalo sacrifice; baskets of food carried to the goddess—turn quickly into a lesson in hierarchy, as portions are handed out according to caste, gender and age.

Kamble writes about hunger in the same register as she writes festivals or gods—flat, unadorned, factual. A child eats what wriggles in her bowl. A community receives leftovers after serving a goddess. There is the smell of stale rice, the taste of watery gruel, the silence of women waiting at the edge of the plate. The dull weight of scarcity is present throughout. The effect is quite disorienting because of an emphasis on hunger as routine. Humiliation, too, does not figure as a single event, repeating until it begins to structure the narrative. In this way, Kamble pushes against the dominant mode of feminist life writing, which leans on confession or redemption. There is no healing here, no attempt at consolation or transcendence. There is only the steady insistence on how people lived.

Kamble is not alone. Urmila Pawar, in her autobiography, *The Weave of My Life*, which was translated from Marathi and published in 2008, writes of mealtimes where men ate first, and women learned to survive on scraps. Bama, in her 1992 autobiography, *Karukku*, re-

calls school lunches where caste determined what and how children ate. Across languages, decades and genres besides life writing, writers have represented hunger in similarly unsparing ways. Jacinta Kercketta's *Angor*, a 2016 collection of poems in Hindi, which documents injustices against the Adivasi community in Jharkhand, and speaks of barren fields and exhausted bodies, where hunger is a facet of daily life. In Bani Basu's 1990 novel *A Plate of White Marble*, food is a tool of control. These texts come from very different places and vantage points, but all use food to write of deprivation, while

refusing to romanticise it. Whereas food writing is often lush, they choose bluntness, repetition and omission. To read them closely is to see how literature can make hunger legible through visceral detail: the fly on the jaggery paste, the quiet waiting for scraps.

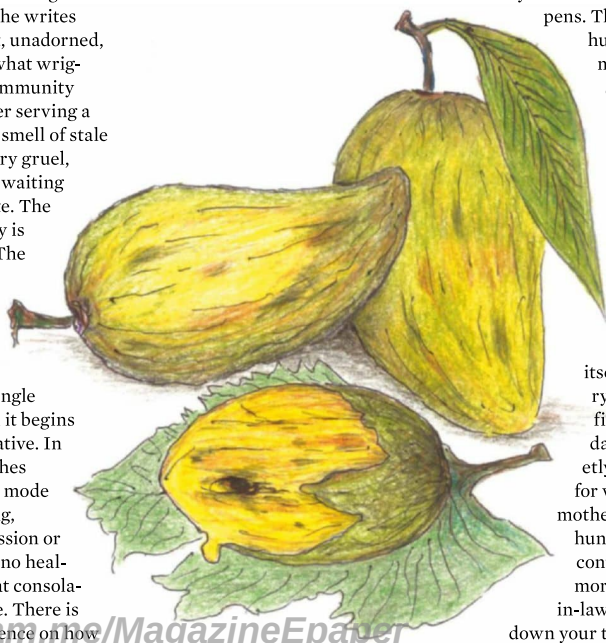
ONE OF THE MOST unforgettable images in *The Prisons We Broke* comes early. Food sits uncovered as flies gather over it, while daughters-in-law silently watch plates empty before them. Kamble does not pause to interpret this moment for the reader. The language carries no flourish, only the flat record of what hap-

pens. The effect is unsettling:

hunger is not framed as memory tinged with sorrow, but as a regular condition of life. This refusal of lyricism runs through the memoir. Kamble describes chapatis crushed into jaggery water, swarmed by flies, left to ferment while children fight for scraps. The

sequence of eating itself becomes an allegory for power: men eat first, children next, and daughters-in-law sit quietly at the edge, waiting for whatever remains. If a mother-in-law notices their hungry gaze, she would contemptuously throw a morsel at her daughter-in-law, saying, "Push that

down your throat, you shameless



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hussy! Aren't you ashamed to stare so at a child who's eating? At least let the food get down his throat! Your evil eye will make the child choke. Don't you know how to behave like a good daughter-in-law?"

This dynamic is recorded without commentary, yet its violence is unmistakable. The cruelty lies not only in withholding but in the mockery, as the act of staring at food itself is branded shameful. An ordinary domestic scene—serving food at a festival—becomes a theatre of humiliation, demonstrating how hunger is organised by gender as much as by caste. The tone is almost reportorial, but its flatness forces a recognition of hunger not as figurative absence but as enforced hierarchy.

Kamble's writing is at its most unsettling when it moves from ritual abundance to everyday deprivation. The buffalo sacrifice is narrated in painstaking detail—the procession, the goddess possession, the animal's bleeding thighs, the brocade turban of the Patil who kills the animal with a sword—as is the cooking of meat:

By this time, huge stone chulhas would be ignited, with the pots kept atop, the huge flames licking them. One of the pots contained beaten grains of jowar. After the meat had been cooked till it was tender, some red chilli powder, prepared and kept ready, would be added. Jars of water would be slowly poured into the pot. The panji was now ready. If it turned out to be very tasty, it would qualify as laki. After the chilli powder was added, all meat pieces were taken out and kept in a huge basket and the hot soup would remain in the pot. Then the pot was filled with red chilli powder and brought to the boil. Now it was time to serve the food.

Men gorge on the food, children run about with aluminium plates, the meat is finished in no time. For a moment, this description conjures up an image of plenitude and satiation. But the description closes with the Mahar community returning to their "dirt pits on the

periphery of the village, like discarded rags." The narrative structure mirrors the cycle itself: abundance is always fleeting. Scenes of plenty quickly morphing into scarcity recur in episodes about the Ashadh festival. Baskets of offerings from the goddess's temple arrive, children rush naked through the mud, frenzied and clamouring for food, fighting for their share. Half the portion disappears on the way home. The remaining scraps barely last a day.

Even outside rituals or festivals, food becomes the site of degradation. At one point, Kamble describes a woman from the Mahar community at the village shop. She stands at a distance, her pallav stretched out, begging for half a shell of coconut, some shikakai. The shopkeeper throws the items from afar into her sari. Money is placed on the threshold—"that of course does not pollute him!" Children are warned not to go near her. Here, hunger is inseparable from humiliation, eating a reminder of untouchability, and buying food associated with abasement. Kamble's prose strips the encounter of drama, presenting it in a few sentences, but the careful distance, the throwing of food, and the exaggerated instructions to the shopkeeper's children are clearly legible as adhering to a social script.

The Prisons We Broke is not organised by grand turning points or revelations but by cycles of scarcity and brief relief. Rice, chapati, jaggery, meat, offerings—each appears only to reveal hierarchy. By returning to food, Kamble builds a world where deprivation is unavoidable. At times, the irony is devastating. Gods are fed before Dalit children, animals are sacrificed while human hunger remains, and mothers-in-law guard food jealously. The juxtaposition is evident enough: abundance for the divine, scarcity for the human. Yet Kamble never underlines this explicitly, resisting the impulse to translate humiliation into a moral lesson.

The memoir also gestures toward how hunger is inherited. The insistence on detail turns the body into a site where caste is remembered and narrated, not glossed over.

WHERE KAMBLE'S MEMOIR documents deprivation as a collective history, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* brings the kitchen into sharper focus, showing how food is cooked is shaped by caste and gender.

She begins with the school tiffin box. For upper-caste children, lunch was a small spectacle: "What have you brought in your tiffin box today?" they ask each other, exchanging names of dishes. Pawar, who lived close enough to school to eat at home, listened closely. She discovered new words this way. *Poli*, not *chapati*. *Dadpe pohe*—a phrase that baffled her, since *dadpe* also meant beaten or oppressed. *Shrikhand*, described by her brother as looking like ointment, was incomprehensible to a girl who had never tasted anything that smooth or sweet. Even the way dishes were named reinforced the distance. Taste itself was stratified; to know certain words was to belong to an orbit her family could not enter:

Dasara was called Vijaya Dashami in our school, but I was so confused when someone referred to bhakri as dashmi! I had to quietly open the tiffin box of a girl called Sunanda Phatak—without letting her know, of course—to find out what this dashmi was!

The autobiography recalls coarse rice from the ration shop, eaten with *pithale*, a pulse-flour curry. Sometimes there were leafy vegetables from the backyard; sometimes *bhakris* made of red jowar, so rough that it was hard to swallow. In these moments, her mother would speak endurance as virtue: "Eat it, child! Only the person who can eat such food can achieve a lot of good."

What makes Pawar's recollections sting is their sensory vividness. She remembers aloo leaves in the rainy season, the careful peeling of stems that left children's hands itching. She remembers curries where rice was drowned in watery gravies, so thin that a family joke compared the order of eating it to a son-in-law counting his brothers: "If I survive this curry, four. Otherwise, three." Humour threads through these memories,

but never to soften them or overwrite the monotony they underscore.

Fish carries its own politics:

Tasty fish like surmay, pomfret, and halwa never came our way. All that we could get were mushi, wagala, shingta: fish with a strong smell and thick skin, which nobody wanted. Yet another fish with a similar foul smell was the bull fish, so called because it had a horn like a bull's on its head. Only Mahars ate that. No amount of salt, amsul, or chilli powder could drive away the strong smell. We invariably complained. Finally Aaye gave in and bought small fish, which were not so smelly.

The smell of the fish clung to clothes and made Pawar reluctant to carry it to school. Food was a clear marker of identity, exposing caste location through smell. Even fruits followed this pattern. Hapooos mangoes, exported abroad, never reached their house. What came were rotten Raiwal mangoes, fallen to the ground or eaten by birds, carried home by the village watchman. The image is quietly devastating: the sweet fruit of Konkani travels to far-away countries, while children of the region's Dalit families eat what drops in the dirt.

There are flashes of delight in Pawar's writing. These are often fleeting or shadowed by instances of thrift. She remembers her mother making *bhanore*, a cake-like preparation of rice flour, molasses, coconut, cooked slowly over live coals, for festive occasions or as gifts for relatives. Recalling "the beautiful smell permeating the whole house drove the sleep away from my eyes." The dish lasted eight days, she states—rationed sweetness. Similarly, fish stock *saar*—a watery, smelly liquid boiled from fish scraps, which she calls "an extremely low-quality dish with no nutritional value"—becomes the staple diet for daughters-in-law, tolerated in silence despite its tendency to upset stomachs. The humour of a schoolyard song about its stench does not hide its cruelty.

Modaks, a sweet dumpling made during the Ganapati festival, were rare enough to seem

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mythical. When an attempt went wrong, producing only a mixture of rice flour and water, it became a local anecdote about ignorance and poverty. Pawar's mother emerges as a commanding presence in the book's stories, thrifty to the point of severity, turning every instance of scarcity into a lesson. The stories she told her children—about obedient boys eating imaginary vegetables with bhakris, or sons-in-law drowned in curry—disciplined the palate, teaching children to eat whatever was placed before them, to never ask for more or complain.

Pawar's prose works through accumulation. The form of her narrative is casual and anecdotal. She does not linger on a single instance of humiliation, she strings together memories until recurrence itself becomes the point. This is where her writing bears out what certain Dalit feminist critics have argued. Sharmila Rege, for instance, notes in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* that Dalit women's narratives are marked by "the everydayness of caste oppression, where the body becomes the primary site through which inequality is lived and reproduced." Caste is encountered "through the body, through work, and through food." She adds that "they do not seek to transform pain into metaphor but record it as lived reality" and "locate experience not in abstract suffering but in the material routines of labour, hunger and survival."

Pawar's rice, fish, mangoes and watery gravies all exemplify this—she writes them as routine rather than symbolic meals. She also leans into irony and humour, which complicates how depriv-

ation is narrated. The quip about the curry, the mockery of bad modaks—these are strategies, of a sort, of survival. This humour is deeply political. It resists both the pity of outsiders and the sentimentality of nostalgia. It insists on remembering poverty in its textures, its smells, its jokes, without turning it into tragedy or triumph.

These memories become part of a larger project: stitching together the personal and the collective, placing everyday domesticity against the history of caste. The kitchen is not a private space here. It is where hierarchy is most immediate, where women learn their place at the edge of the plate, where children inherit the discipline of silence, and where poverty is moralised. By recording these details, Pawar refuses to let the domestic be dismissed as minor. She demonstrates that to write about food is to write about power.

In Bama's *Karukku*, too, anecdotes narrate how food is rationed, ridiculed, or intertwined with shame. At noon, children rushed to collect their free meal: "The moment it struck twelve, they'd rush off plate in hand, even the tiniest crab-like ones, for their free meal. The church bell struck the hour at twelve. That was the signal." This meal becomes a public scene of want, turning eating into something hurried, exposed, and communal in the most unglamorous sense. In Bama's neighbourhood, food is also a marker of everyday precarity: "Usually, in our street, no one cooked at noon... at other times it was always kuuzh, millet porridge." Meals are less about comfort than about getting by.

Everyday food, too, carries its own grammar of humiliation. There are unchanging dietary staples: "Even though they worked so hard and suffered bodily pain, our people laughed and were cheerful. This is a community that was born to work. And however hard they toil, it is the same kuuzh every day. The same broken-grain gruel. The same watery dried-fish curry." When one woman grinds masala at midday and makes a curry, she earns the nickname *Mid-day-masala*. The humour is sharp but also revealing: deviating from the regimented rhythms enforced by poverty—cooking something that was not kuuzh in the day, for instance—was considered a strange thing to do. Nicknames in *Karukku* stem from food, bodies, accidents of survival—Dal-bum, Crow, Leaky, Floater.

What sets Bama apart is how she recounts anecdotes almost as though they were overheard in the street, shaped by gossip, laughter and repetition. The story of a woman fighting for her place in the queue at the pump, for instance, shows how quickly things would morph into taunts or caste insults:

It seems she stood her ground stubbornly, saying, "How dare you chuck away my bucket?" Everyone there burst out laughing because she kept on saying "bycket" for "bucket." It seems she was incensed and started cursing and calling them names, saying, "You are only fit to collect sniggers and slippers like Chakkili boys."

The names you heard along our streets would really surprise you. People's baptismal names, given at church, were one thing; the names we used in the street were quite another.

Karukku is filled with such moments, where the ordinary turns

abrasive. A child rushing with a plate, a neighbour making curry at the wrong time of day, or a queue where one woman is mocked until she becomes a story. None of these episodes is transformed into grandiose metaphor. They remain small, but the way they stack up together gives the prose its power. Like Kamble, Bama refuses to embellish. But unlike Kamble's near-reportorial tone, Bama's style echoes the cadences of Tamil street talk and bristles with both affection and anger.

Food in *Karukku* is inseparable from memory. It is how people recall their childhood, how they retell jokes, how they name neighbours, how words sound, how nicknames travel, how insults stick. The memoir also reveals how food rituals reinforce hierarchy. At the Muniappasaami temple, offerings of food and money are made during festivals, only to become objects of theft, gossip and retribution. Elsewhere, stories circulate about men who steal mangoes, coconuts or grain from landlords, surviving by turning theft into folklore. These stories are not told as didactic lessons. They appear as part of the village's oral narratives, underscoring that food is never a stable property but always a contested resource. In this sense, *Karukku* extends what Kamble and Pawar write, but with a sharper sense of how hunger infiltrates speech and anecdote.

Karukku also complicates the idea of memoir as a confessional form. There is no note of redemption here, and the stories of nicknames, meals, theft and insults are not shaped into a single, linear arc. Just as in Kamble's prose, repetition is critical to the form—stories are told side by side, with the narrative sometimes circling back, sometimes trailing off. Bama's layering mimics the chorus of a community, and resists both romanticisation and redemption. Through rhythm and humour, she exposes how caste permeates even the smallest details of life. In refusing to elevate hunger into symbolism, she lets it remain what it is: the daily, humiliating fact of survival.

JACINTA KERKETTA'S POETRY widens the terrain of hunger—moving out of kitchens and courtyards, to fields, forests and prayer halls of Jharkhand. In *Angor*, her first bilingual collection, scarcity is not only associated with what is on the plate but as much with the theft of grain, clearing of forests and the silence enforced by church sermons and mining contracts.

One poem, "Time for Prayer," begins with a sharp indictment: the best part of the harvest never reaches those who worked the land, but "remains trapped in the stomachs of a handful of people." Hunger here is not natural or accidental, but arranged, and justified by sermons that declare the hoarders "the chosen ones." What looks like piety becomes another way to mask inequality. The poem collapses the space between food and power: to control grain is to control faith. In "Why the Mahua is not Plucked from the Tree?," a child asks why the fruit is not taken early, and the mother replies that the blossoms "live in the womb all night" and must be gathered only in the morning. It is a small domestic exchange, but it points to an ethic of time and care that resists the extractive hurry of markets. "The river, the mountain, and the bazaar" underscores this idea too:

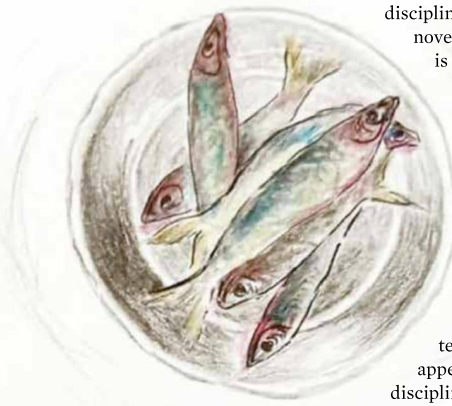
What would you like to buy, the shopkeeper asked.

Brother, a little rain, a handful wet earth,
A bottle of river, and that mountain preserved there,
Hanging on that wall, a piece of nature as well.

The pared-down style of these poems is deliberate. Kerketta does not conjure up lushness or metaphor. Her language is closer to being a form of testimony. Her poetry reflects what the theorist Rob Nixon calls "slow violence": the long, invisible deprivation that stretches across generations, leaving no dramatic headline but eroding lives all the same. Hunger in her poems is structural, stretched over bodies and landscapes until it feels permanent. By strip-

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disciplined. In this sense, the novel is about how appetite is policed. The erasure of taste turns food into a moral code.

What makes Basu's novel valuable in this constellation is the way it unsettles the lush, sensual imagery often attached to Bengali food culture. Instead of sweets and fish curries, she gives us austerity and plainness. Food appears not as pleasure but as discipline: "the prescribed meal of a widow's broth of boiled rice, potato and green banana" is a daily ritual rather than nourishment. Elsewhere, abundance is carefully staged yet withheld—"on a white marble plate... a lump of rice" is served with ceremonial restraint, its starkness amplified by the ritual surrounding it. Even when the household overflows with food, access remains controlled: "the kitchen was chock-a-block with a variety of rich dishes," while the widow's food is carefully limited. Eating itself becomes a lesson in hierarchy, obedience and gendered restraint.

What these writers give us is not a literature of taste, but of survival. Food in their texts is not overlaid with nostalgia or metaphor. A bhakri too rough to swallow, a watery porridge, a child rushing with an aluminium plate at the stroke of a church bell. Through this precision of detail, and by holding onto such images, the writing refuses the consolation of beauty. It insists that hunger be seen as a system both arranged and enforced, which produces a dynamic visible in kitchens, courtyards, queues, festivals and elsewhere. The literary force lies in this fidelity to experience, in showing that caste and gender announce themselves not in abstractions but in meals, in leftovers, in the order of who eats first and who waits. ■

ping her poems of aesthetic excess, Kerketta sidesteps the frames that might make deprivation consumable for outsiders. The grain stolen, the prayer misused, the land exhausted—these are not metaphors waiting for scholarly gloss. Kerketta shows that literature by marginalised women does not just describe hunger. It enacts the politics of speaking.

Bani Basu's novel *A Plate of White Marble*, on the other hand, marks a very different angle on how food can regulate women's lives. Following the life of its protagonist, a widow in the 1950s, it observes upper-caste Bengali society, looking particularly closely at regimens around eating in widowhood. When a woman loses her husband, her plate is stripped of fish, meat and spice, reduced to plain rice and vegetables cooked without oil. Here, food does not humiliate through poverty but through ritual. The denial of flavour becomes a daily performance of purity, a way of making grief visible on the body. This, of course, is not hunger in the same sense as Kamble or Pawar describe. It is deprivation disguised as virtue. Widowhood demands that women learn to desire less, that their palate itself become

