

Learning Caste

Banal and Brutal

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Growing up as a third-generation immigrant in Mumbai,¹ caste identities were regularly masked or dominated by language-based ethnic identities. Thus, I first learnt that we were *Madrasis* and then that we were *lungivalas*, when the ‘sons of the soil’ movement erupted in the 1970s demanding that Bombay was for Maharashtrians. Even the vegetable sellers easily recognized our South Indianness (or *Madrasinness*, since *Madrasi* came to stand for all people south of the Vindhya) as they addressed the women as *mami* and not *behnji*, which was reserved for North Indian women. It was only when my family visited what was referred to as our ‘native place’ that I heard about Brahmins in the context of Tamil politics and the Dravidian movement, which was characterized at home as an anti-Brahmin movement. In response to the anti-Madrasi movement of the Shiv Sena in the 1970s, my mother was one of many Tamil women who formally took up learning Marathi at the Tamil Sangam. (She went on to become one of the earliest Tamil speakers in Bombay to teach Marathi at the school level.) My guess is that the Sangam, surely, must have been a site for discussions on caste and even conflicts surrounding caste since non-Brahmins too were part of the migration, albeit not in as many numbers as the Brahmins. However, in all these moments, there was no mention of caste in my home. Thus, I only learnt about the efforts of the Tamils to blend in with the ways of Bombay.

My earliest lessons on caste occurred ironically at a time when elaborate attempts were being made by my family and friends to negate its presence and power over our lives. Even in the 1970s, the winds of change had forced many to disavow what was perceived to be ‘casteism’, at least in public discourse. Indeed, to be called a *jaativaadi* was, and still continues to be, a vicious

accusation. None is exempt from this. Thus, when I hear my maternal grandmother assert every now and then that ‘there are only two *jatis* in the world: men and women,’² I take her assertion to reveal more about the social pressures on public discourse than any mental or material manifestations of her true thoughts on caste, within which she lives her life, observing all kinds of caste-based taboos. Over time, I understood that the higher one’s caste status, the greater the disavowal of caste. Much later, I was to realize that this was very similar to attitudes towards racism in the United States. For, who can afford to disregard the brutality of caste (or race) other than those who do not face its brunt and, further, continue to enjoy its privileges? Accrued over generations, such privileges conferred by an ascriptive system of caste continue to be exploited in contemporary social arrangements.

My earliest glimpse of the brutality of caste was when I was very young. All I remember was my frightened incomprehension when I came across a part of a very old home that we were visiting in interior Tamil Nadu, which housed a different kind of latrine than any I had ever seen—a dry latrine. To my horror, this was still in use by some people in that home, and I even saw a shadowy figure coming to clean it at night. Not surprisingly, I was not encouraged to ask any questions about this practice. Much later, I read about this as a human rights violation, and recently had a chance to meet with the *Safai Karmachari* union in Chennai and learn about their struggles (and my responsibilities) against such an imposed condition of work that exemplifies Paul Farmer’s notion of the ‘pathologies of power’—the imposition of violence and disease upon particular human bodies by unequal power relations.

Caste, further, does not only operate in the dramatic and brutal ways that we witness with tragic regularity as most recently in Khairlanji, Bhandara district, Maharashtra. In fact, caste could operate in far more ordinary and banal ways. It produces, in a sense, every physical body within its ‘field’, and dictates the ways in which one comports oneself in the presence of people of clearly ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ castes. I refer here to the seemingly endless micro-practices of distinction that constitute caste in everyday life. Coming to a serious caste consciousness was, for me, a long process. It involved, first, the cognition of the game of making distinctions that pervades Indian social life both inside and outside the home. Then, a re-cognition of this game as a game of caste and not simply a ritualistic religious practice or one related to personal hygiene or any other rational claim. Finally, it meant teaching myself to defy caste.

The banality of caste is best seen in non-dramatic aspects of everyday life, such as food—the conception of what is food, its production (or more commonly for urban residents, its procurement), preparation, the conviviality or lack thereof that accompanies its consumption, etc. Although food-sharing as a marker of caste is on the decline, largely due to the onset of certain aspects of modernity (factory cafeterias, eating out, etc.), distinctive food practices continue to provide occasions where caste reveals itself. Or, shall we say, food is still a key site where people perform, produce and reproduce caste?

Intimately shaped by caste, or even constituted by caste, food in the Indic context verily contains a ‘surplus of meanings’ perhaps like no other cultural setting in this world. In the spirit of the age of disavowing casteism, my mother would earnestly attempt to show ‘how far we have come’ from following or observing caste rules using the idiom of food. She noted, correctly, that as a vegetarian

and a Brahmin, she tolerated living next door to a fish-eating neighbour who also regularly purchased eggs from the *andavalla* (egg seller) who sold them from door to door. She spoke about her mother who, in contrast, would not allow the egg seller to cast a proverbial shadow upon her, and about her grandmother who would, as family lore has it, not even allow the egg seller to shout on the street lest she heard his voice and would have to bathe all over again to regain purity.³

Over the years, such refrains get appropriately embellished to show ‘how far we have come’. I have heard many middle-class urban liberals, yuppies and the bourgeoisie deny the existence (or persistence) of caste completely, a position that should not to be confused with systematically opposing caste and casteism. In a society organized around caste and other principles of inequality, ‘caste-blind’ social vision amounts to at best, a wishful idealism, and at worst an ideological defence of caste-based privileges since the structure of caste remains intact despite its dismissals and disavowals. When pressed to explain their position further, such individuals usually declare that caste exists only in remote, ‘backward’, rural Indian pockets, with an obligatory reference to Bihar thrown in for good measure. Somehow, caste is not thought of as operating in the kitchens, bedrooms, and boardrooms of urbane city dwellers.

The narrative above for me raises several other questions on the subject of caste. For example, under what conditions does vegetarianism become casteist? In other words, when does it become a practice of exclusion, domination (including cultural domination), stigmatization (or extreme form of degradation) and exploitation? Is the egg seller shunned because he is probably of a ‘lower’ caste, or because the eggs are eaten by ‘lower’ castes and hence embody the nature of such caste, or simply because the eggs are not vegetarian? Perhaps, it is a little of all three. However, none of these reasons are self-evident to me. I see people changing their food habits and adapting their diet to new conditions, especially as immigrants to other regions of the country and the world, by rationalizing their beliefs about food. My mother, after all, did allow eggs into her home when she found that many Brahmin families in Bombay in the 1970s force-fed their children this ‘protein-filled’ food. Nevertheless, it was my father’s task to serve the eggs to my sister and me since my mother could not bring herself to do so. We were first given the eggs raw with milk. Later, after much protest about the taste, we were given boiled eggs, (barely) cooked on a special stove using set of utensils kept outside the kitchen (my mother’s domain). We ate the eggs on special china crockery that no one else ever used. Not surprisingly, I came to view the egg as not simply an egg; under my mother’s semiotic gaze, the egg was transformed into a magical source of impurity, power, and a variety of distinctions.

Vegetarianism of the Brahmin kind, perhaps the Tamil Brahmin kind, which is considered to epitomise cultural ideas of purity, and which sustains caste divisions in society, also seemingly displays aspects of ‘practical reason’. My parents easily accepted the modern tyranny of nutrition as all forms of ‘tonics’ were administered to us children. Some bore names such as *Sharkoferrol*. For some reason, however, such a name—with all its allusions to being a fish-extract product—did not seem to ruffle the conscience of the family. The focus was on giving such tonics or tablets to the young that would enable them to acquire the strength that meat-eating children supposedly had—a fairly common belief in the 1970s among Bombay Brahmins. What could be more practical than surviving the competitiveness of Bombay by building the strength to compete better? Who could also

deny that the large proportion of Brahmin men and women comprising the émigré population of Indians in Euro-American contexts do not engage in radical transgressions of food taboos? Nevertheless, the question of vegetarianism and its relation to casteism retains its importance simply because the popular consciousness among Brahmins in contemporary times regards vegetarianism as a key mark of distinction and cultural superiority over all other castes (with the exception of the Gujarati Jain-influenced *bania* castes who are far more devoutly vegetarian than most Brahmins). Thus, those who wish to portray themselves as liberal non-casteists or even anti-casteists feel compelled to choose the medium of food (by their embrace of non-vegetarianism, for instance) to proclaim their non-allegiance to caste. In addition, those who are already non-vegetarians smugly portray themselves as being already non-casteist, and those who wish to stick to their vegetarianism try their best to dissociate their eating practice from caste, perhaps insisting on a freshly conceived health-related or ethical set of justifications.

Caste is also linked to spatial distance and touch. Another way that I learnt about caste was by participating willy-nilly in games designed to maintain social distance and restrain physical contact between people, between things, and between people and things. This is easily visible in public spaces where different castes live in (and learn to live in) separate neighbourhoods (in villages and small towns), which are demarcated in subtle ways that are recognizable to the residents. We also know that caste distinctions continue to be made at public feasts in villages over the issue of the formation of the *pangats*—the order of sitting and being served—despite the reduction in physical distance between the *pangats*, as observed by Adrian Mayer. In fact, the predominant way of exchanging greetings all over India, the *namaste* with folded palms, serves our caste system perfectly by not requiring people to touch as is normal in most other parts of the world. All this is quite visible in public.

Further, the connection between social distancing and caste is also visible, albeit subtly, in everyday observances within the home. One game known in many households across India, especially among the Brahmin castes, is the '*theetu—madi*' game or the 'impure-pure' game. In this game, every article, action, and relationship is classified as *theetu* or *madi*; there are rules of transformation and the goal is to always 'make *madi*'. Of course, these were not actually viewed as games (much like how capitalism is viewed as the big game in town), but they amount to the kind of socially constructed patterns of play (role-play) that are part of everyday life wherein we 'discover' or are taught the cultural logic of things. My mother therefore always bathed before cooking (somewhat more lax than her mother who would only enter the kitchen after a bath), observed the *theetu* during her periods (now relaxed for the current generations), and always prepared food in ways that followed rules that were true to the *madi* principles. Thus, certain vessels on the table could not touch each other under certain conditions. Each of us ate in our own plates and washed them ourselves (the washing was certainly a good practice that inculcated a sense of responsibility, but it was imposed as a way of not coming in contact with the saliva of others, even one's kin). I certainly enjoyed my first taste of '*jhoota*' when we shared bites out of mangoes with my friends in school who apparently did not observe such rules in their homes! Within a household, caste comes clothed as religious practice when it is sufficiently removed from contact with 'outside' factors (such as people of other castes).

Practices of social distancing such as the above *theetu—madi* game then tend to be viewed as being all about hygiene and not really about caste. This indeed is the main reason given for the practice of bathing right away after a visit to the barbershop taking care to not touch anything, including the curtains of the house.

The game of *madi* not only consecrated the home, but was also rationalized as necessary for performing rituals before the deities displayed prominently on one wall in my mother's kitchen. This was so even when the most regular 'outsider'—the maid or *bai*, a common sight in many middle-class homes in Mumbai—would enter the household every day. Given the compulsions of living in a small 750 sq ft flat, Ramabai, whose caste was only assumed by the family to be different (and lower) than ours,⁴ had to come into the kitchen and walk by the shrine in order to wash the utensils. She too quickly learnt the rules of the game. She had to be done with her chores in the kitchen before the daily rituals or *puja* began. Further, Ramabai could only drink her *chai* in a cup and saucer specially set aside for her use (and to be washed by her only). Unlike the rest of us, she did not get a stainless steel tumbler, a fact masked by the refrain that *bais* anyway love to drink from the saucer (pouring out the *chai* to cool, and then sipping noisily)! The question of touch was embedded in the technology of this steel tumbler, which had a special rim to enable punctilious Brahmin elders pour hot beverage into the mouth without touching the tumbler to their lips. This was a fascinating performance for the youngsters who would be mocked for not being able to drink the *thuki* way ('from up') but could only manage the *chipi* way ('from down'). The lesson I learnt from all this was that Ramabai, whatever she did (or did not do), could never be made *madi*. Her *theetu* was some kind of permanent quality that was attached to her body, and this was a given in the game of caste. All the rest of us came to *theetu* or *madi* in temporary ways and could undergo transformations by acting according to the rules.

Then, there was Yeshvant. In the 1970s, my father had helped him get a job, which established a relationship between our family and his that continues to this day. As a mark of gratitude, Yeshvant would visit us every weekend or two, and help out with household chores, including running errands to the market. Over time he became known to everyone in our extended family, and would help on family occasions such as marriages. I was propelled into caste consciousness through an incident that took place during an engagement ceremony. During a ritually auspicious moment, the family elders indicated in subtle ways that Yeshvant, a Dalit, should be asked to do some work outside the house until the ceremony was completed; that is when I stepped up to object. There was an uncomfortable silence when I pointed out the injustice of requiring his physical labour and his symbolic value to show that we were not casteist, yet wishing his invisibility when we practised caste in the guise of religion. From that moment onwards, my presence in the family was a potential source of friction on the question of caste, religion and social inequality. This is a price I have accepted I must pay for viewing the personal as political. It is easy for the upper castes to challenge casteism outside the home, and even be revolutionary about social issues, yet mutely and meekly give in to familial prejudices, or perhaps even reproduce them at home. Ambedkar rings true to my mind when he compared Ranade, the social reformer (he was far short of being any kind of radical), to Tilak, the political radical but social conservative:

When the social reformer challenges society there is nobody to hail him a martyr. There is nobody even to befriend him. He

is loathed and shunned. But when the political patriot challenges the Government he has the whole society to support him. He is praised, admired and elevated as the saviour. Who shows more courage—the social reformer who fights alone or the political patriot who fights under the cover of a vast mass of supporters?

Looking back, giving up my *poonal*—the sacred thread which marked my entry at the age of 13 into the twice-born Brahminhood of males—was another event that shaped my caste and gender consciousness. I gave it up at first, whimsically, at the age of 19 when I went to Calcutta to study marine engineering. Staying in the hostel with a group of young men drawn from all parts of India, I experienced my first caste-based teasing when we changed our clothes in full view of each other in the ‘kit room’ of the hostel. I quickly decided to give up my Brahmin mark of distinction if only to try and ‘fit in’. However, my visits back home drew me into long arguments about my not wearing the thread, arguments that were emotionally charged. I compromised many times by agreeing to participate in the ritual held annually to change the thread (although I did not wear it for the rest of the year). It took me a few more years to politically formulate my arguments and totally give up the thread and any ritual associated with it. I have now come to believe that it is impossible to separate the ‘cultural’ practices of a caste from the practice of casteism. It is casteism that produces marks of caste-hood or caste identity, and not the other way around. Thus, whenever wearing the *poonal* is justified as a cultural practice of group identity (‘this is our tradition’), I can only remark that wearing the *poonal* engenders exclusion (casteism and sexism) and then justifies it as distinction (identity). I was not prepared to reproduce such a social practice.

In this sense, caste stokes both difference and hierarchy. While hierarchy operates in the form of brutal social inequalities or, more precisely, as graded inequalities as Ambedkar reminds us, differences appear in banal ways, which are ultimately dangerous and indeed capable of turning evil in the Arendtian sense.⁵ The theatre critic Rustom Bharucha captures this best when he points out how we see so much of difference in India that we have become indifferent to difference. It is however precisely in grasping Bharucha’s point that we need to be serious about the banality of caste. The caste system operates in a way that allows people to not worry about the details of the difference (exactly how do the Others differ?) but remain convinced about the facts of the difference. I need not know my neighbours’ diverse micro-practices of food, worship, matrimony, music, clothes, and such things; I do not need to know the history of their practices and beliefs—a history that would inevitably allow me to see how differences are produced in particular contexts by the practice of casteism, which requires such differences to remain relevant. Instead, all I know is that they are different from us (and perhaps inferior, although I think such a supremacist position is increasingly well-hidden in public discourse). Pierre Bourdieu captures this best in his concept of taste, which he sees as ‘an acquired disposition to differentiate and appreciate ... [that] ensures recognition without implying knowledge of distinctive features which define it’.⁶ Today, caste legitimizes itself by seeking to operate simply as taste, a taste for difference (and as distinction). I say ‘legitimize’, since I am convinced that caste as taste only barely conceals caste as power. It is this taste for difference that is extended in overtly racialized ways by the forces of Hindutva as it characterizes Muslims in contemporary India and proceeds to dominate and terrorize them. Caste thinking is thus the engine for communalist thinking.

Caste therefore goes beyond differences to operate through prejudice and power. It exists when prejudice is increasingly privatized but erupts in living room discussions for people to ‘safely’ vent their real feelings. It also erupts in violent and dramatic ways in different parts of India as an expression of the power of the locally dominant caste or a generalized upper caste. Additionally, however (and this point is conveniently forgotten many times), caste also operates through privilege (either direct or indirect structural benefits) when the advantages conferred by one’s caste are rationalized as ‘merit’ or go largely unacknowledged. This point about existing and accrued caste privileges is crucial in the debates over reservations. As I gather bits of my own family history, I have realized, both, the complexity of caste relations as well as the complicity of all in reproducing casteism under the guise of ‘privileges of birth’ and as ‘earned assets’ (to extend a term used by Peggy McIntosh in her insightful piece on White privilege in the US). I stress ‘all’ simply because the aura of invincibility or intellectual ability or entitlement that has accrued to certain upper castes owing to the practice of casteism is also from time to time internalized and reproduced by the lower castes, thus perpetuating the graded inequality of the caste kind; the Khairlanji massacre bears witness to this point. And yet, Brahmins hold a unique responsibility to examine their own privileges, even if it were to be a small land grant given by a non-Brahmin upper caste *zamindar* to one’s ancestors 150 years ago in keeping with the caste-based hiring and gift-giving customs of the day. Such a gift remains a privilege despite the fact that the receivers may have worked with tenacity, diligence, intelligence, and even honesty for the next 150 years. Certainly, jobs in India are still overwhelmingly found through personal networks that are suffused with caste considerations and euphemized as family connections (see the recent studies by Ashwini Deshpande and Katherine Newman⁷ on caste as social and cultural capital in the job market, that is, as a means of access to networks and knowledge bases).

To come back to food and caste, not because food is the key site of caste battles (housing and jobs are), but because food is one of the most expedient ways to romanticize one’s resistance to casteism. To give an example, I have seen some Brahmins make much of their beef-eating in public spaces, holding it up as their great act of transgression, and a symbol of their resistance to caste. Strictly speaking, or at least historically speaking, beef-eating should not even be viewed as a transgression given the historical documentation of beef-eating among Brahmins in ancient times by scholars such as D. N. Jha. Nevertheless, without denying its current symbolic value at least at the individual level, I am always left with a feeling that this practice of beef-eating and its public admission does not undo the facts of Brahmin privilege in any way at all. The true test of defying caste (for the upper castes) has nothing to do with the ability to eat beef or discontinue the use of one’s *poonal*, although these may be necessary at times to demonstrate one’s commitment to anti-casteism. Instead, a more difficult act of defiance would be to de-class oneself by conscientiously not partaking in caste-based class privileges that continue to confer a cultural (and eventually economic) capital on the ‘upper’ caste populations in India and abroad. For example, in a liberalizing and privatizing political economy, ‘upper’ caste and Brahmin old-boys networks have shifted significantly from the realm of the public sector, from governmental bureaucracy and public institutions of education, to private, corporate, professionalized spaces. Brahmins form the backbone of India’s corporate world, occupying very

high and middle-level managerial positions of power, wielding in many cases the power to recruit and open doors of opportunity. I know that in certain powerful and wealthy circles, I will be hired because of my caste (and the warm fuzzy feelings it immediately generates in the casteist mind, until the truth about my political position is revealed) whereas my friend will not be considered due to her caste. I have heard it openly being admitted by Brahmin professionals holding high offices in the private sector that they will not hire a Muslim or someone from an obviously lower or Dalit caste. If this is so, then being an anti-casteist upper-caste subject must entail declining the possibilities of taking advantage of such opportunities that may present themselves to an upper-caste person.

Over the years, I have imbibed all sorts of entities that would not be classified as food in my parents' home. But a new problem presents itself now. How does one justify one's preference for vegetarian food (at least sometimes) when one is born a Brahmin but has gone through the deconstruction of caste and food laws by transgressing every taboo, but has then gone on (not come back) to prefer vegetarian food on the grounds of ethics, ecology and health? This is not easy at all. Somewhat more complex is my partner's predicament. Growing up in a Nair meat-eating family, she turned vegetarian upon discovering the truths of the industrial mass production of animals as food in the USA. This was long before she met me, a non-vegetarian, anti-Brahminical Brahmin (as long as casteism exists, how can one's caste wither away?). The irony is that whenever she discloses that she is vegetarian, the silent assumption among many people is that she gave up meat for her Brahmin mate! Eating meat with gusto seems to have become a major mode of displaying one's anti-Brahminism among both Brahmins and Dalits alike. Yet, this act is meaningless if it does not entail the understanding of the ecological, health-related and ethical aspects of food, all of which are also imbricated in the question of caste. However, caste is not the sole determinant of the politics of food. There are ways to be non-Brahminical vegetarian.

Living an inter-caste marriage has alerted me to many of the subtler forms of casteism in our midst, all of which depend on some form or other of a cultivated taste for difference. It is important to note that caste is not a distaste for difference. Only rarely is there a desire to 'convert' the lower-caste Other to become more like one's own kindred (the annihilation of difference, so to say, should not to be mistaken for the Ambedkarite vision of the annihilation of caste). This happens very occasionally, for example, when my partner experiences minor attempts by some family members to Brahminize her so that she can temporarily be passed off on public occasions as 'one of us' for the express purposes of social standing. This is cynicism at its best—camouflage the difference that has erupted within, so as to not lose face, and in this process re-inscribe the same difference in a hierarchical fashion (my difference is better than yours). The taste for difference persists unabashedly. Much more common is the practice of 'making invisible', by either totally ignoring her presence or by disavowing caste as relevant shaper of identities and inequalities.

All these experiences have taught me to be anti-casteist in a caste-conscious manner. This implies that I make the effort to think of caste as a relational reality (caste is about social relations) rather than a substantial reality (caste as a property of a being, or an essence). What caste means and one's own political position vis-à-vis caste can only be worked out through negotiating one's everyday social space, which is suffused with influences of caste, gender and class. When I take my guest's

plate from his hand and wash it along with other dishes in his view and my guest happens to be Dalit, I signal to the discerning eye that this is a significant act and that I am serious about being anti-casteist. Being caste-conscious means that I cannot equate our different caste positions (not so-called cultural difference) when I know Dalits are brutalized simply for being visible. When I shared a room at a conference with a prominent Dalit—Bahujan intellectual, he noticed that I did not wear a *poonal* and hence began a long conversation that did not easily assume ‘castelessness’. I am certain that I am keenly observed when I am invited for dinner to the homes of my friends or colleagues who happen to be Dalit or any other caste for that matter, simply because food and commensality is not innocent in the Indian context, in India or abroad. Caste has usually been treated as a public matter and so sharing some of these more private tales hopefully focuses the gaze on the more intimate moments of casteism.

NOTES

1. My paternal grandfather had migrated from a small town in Madurai district, Tamil Nadu in 1923, when a number of Tamil brahmans left for industrial work opportunities in the North, especially Calcutta and Bombay. This was in the wake of the non-Brahman movement in the South and changing political-economic conditions of brahmans who until then had enjoyed many caste privileges in the form of either land-grants which allowed them to be absentee landlords and/or administrative positions in the feudal economy of the countryside.
2. Ulakattille irendu jāti than irukku: aanum pennum.
3. Such observance of purity rituals were possible of course only in spaces such as the agraaharam or the Brahman street/quarters in south India.
4. As it turned out, like most other bais in Mumbai, Ramabai too was a Dalit.
5. It is necessary to now distinguish the Arendtian sense from the Bush sense of the term as in axis of evil. For the former, evil arises out of conditions that give rise to it and is capable of arising in anyone. This does not seem to hold true for the latter sense of the term.