



The Dalit Kitchen in Marathwada: Food, Memory, and Resistance in Shahu Patole's Narrative

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Abstract— This paper offers an in-depth examination of *Dalit Kitchen in Marathwada* by Shahu Patole, a groundbreaking work within Dalit literature that brings together culinary traditions, caste dynamics, and cultural identity. More than a collection of regional recipes or a memoir of gastronomic nostalgia, Patole's narrative functions as a politically charged cultural archive. It foregrounds the lived realities of Dalit communities in Maharashtra's Marathwada region, revealing how food operates simultaneously as a source of nourishment, a bearer of memory, and a powerful metaphor for social exclusion and resistance. Through the lens of food studies, subaltern theory, and Dalit autobiography, this paper argues that the Dalit kitchen, as described by Patole is not a passive domestic site but a vibrant space of agency, struggle, and self-definition. It critically interrogates caste-based food taboos, the Brahmanical notions of purity and pollution, and the socio-cultural hierarchies that shape culinary preferences and access. Patole's text elevates the everyday act of cooking into an act of cultural assertion, documenting the ingenuity, resilience, and creativity of Dalit communities, particularly women, in transforming meagre resources into nourishing meals. The paper situates Patole's work within a broader corpus of Dalit narratives that use personal memory and vernacular storytelling to challenge hegemonic historical accounts. By writing in Marathi and employing colloquial idioms, Patole preserves the authenticity of oral traditions and resists the aestheticization of Dalit experiences by dominant literary canons. Ultimately, the paper contends that *Dalit Kitchen in Marathwada* reimagines the kitchen as a radical site of expression where stories simmer alongside spices, and where every dish served is instilled with the flavour of resistance, survival, and reclaimed dignity. This work expands the boundaries of both food writing and Dalit literature, asserting the cultural and political significance of what is often dismissed as the mundane.



Keywords— Dalit literature, Shahu Patole, food studies, Marathwada, caste, resistance, cultural identity, subaltern narratives

Introduction

Food is often relegated to the domain of the mundane an everyday biological necessity stripped of its socio-cultural complexities. Yet, within subaltern discourses, food emerges as a deeply politicized entity, laden with symbolic meaning as a marker of identity, a medium of resistance, and a repository of cultural memory. In the context of marginalized communities, particularly Dalits in India, food operates as a site where histories of oppression and strategies of survival converge. It reflects the politics of access, the hierarchies of purity and pollution,

and the resilience of communities in preserving cultural practices despite systemic exclusion (Appadurai, 1988; Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013).

In *Dalit Kitchen in Marathwada*, Shahu Patole intricately weaves personal anecdotes, culinary memories, and socio-political observations to present a narrative deeply rooted in caste-based oppression and cultural endurance. His work goes beyond the realm of mere culinary documentation; it interrogates the casteist underpinnings of food cultures in India, wherein certain ingredients, cooking practices, and even modes of

consumption have historically been stigmatized or prohibited for Dalit communities (Guru, 2012). Patole's memoir-cum-culinary narrative functions as a counter-discursive text that challenges dominant aesthetic frameworks of food writing, which often romanticize gastronomy through elite, upper-caste, and globalized lenses.

By foregrounding dishes such as *zunka-bhakar*, *mutton curry*, and preparations using foraged ingredients, Patole reclaims culinary traditions that have been historically devalued or invisible by the hegemonic discourse on "authentic" Indian cuisine. In doing so, he dismantles the Brahmanical logic of purity and pollution that pervades food hierarchies, exposing how taste itself is socially constructed and politically mediated (Dalal, 2015; Srinivas, 2006). His narrative transforms the kitchen into a political space, a site of both memory and defiance where recipes become testimonies of survival, and flavours become acts of resistance.

Ultimately, *Dalit Kitchen in Marathwada* is an intervention into both Dalit literature and food studies, positioning culinary narratives as critical tools for understanding caste oppression and cultural resilience. Patole's work insists that food writing must not only engage with taste and technique but also confront the structural inequalities embedded in who gets to eat, what is eaten, and how it is remembered. In this sense, the text becomes a subversive cultural archive, one that records and resists the erasures of Dalit food traditions from mainstream narratives of Indian culinary heritage.

Contextualizing the Dalit Kitchen

Marathwada, a region with a volatile history of caste violence and a vibrant tradition of Dalit activism, forms the geographic and cultural backdrop for Shahu Patole's *Dalit Kitchen in Marathwada*. This region has been shaped by profound socio-political movements, particularly those influenced by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, whose advocacy for social justice, anti-caste reform, and education for marginalized communities left an enduring impact on its political consciousness (Omvedt, 1994; Teltumbde, 2018). Patole situates his kitchen within this charged milieu, offering a microcosmic perspective on how caste hierarchies penetrate beyond the public sphere into the intimate spaces of domestic life.

In dominant upper-caste narratives, the kitchen is often framed as a space of ritual purity, sanctity, and Brahmanical order, where food preparation adheres to strict notions of pollution avoidance and religious codes (Srinivas, 2006). In contrast, the Dalit kitchen, as described by Patole, is not a sanctified space insulated from the social order, but rather one of negotiation between scarcity and

creativity, humiliation and dignity, silence and voice. It becomes a lived arena where caste-based exclusions manifest most palpably: prohibitions on inter-dining with Dalits, the stigmatization of meat consumption, and the hierarchical labelling of certain foods as "polluted" or "inferior" (Guru, 2012). Food, in Patole's narrative, operates as an archive of memory. The coarse texture of *bhakri*, the earthy aroma of *zunka*, the tang of wild greens foraged from the forest these are not merely culinary items but carriers of historical and emotional resonance. They evoke memories of poverty, resilience, and the inventive genius of Dalit women who, in the face of economic deprivation, transformed minimal and often foraged ingredients into nourishing meals. This culinary archive functions as a form of oral history, preserving a collective memory that is rarely documented in written records (Counihan, 1999; Goody, 1982).

Patole's recollections weave together food practices with stories of childhood, seasonal rhythms, community rituals, and local customs. These memories are deeply gendered, highlighting how women often the primary food providers become silent yet powerful bearers of culinary traditions. Their agency emerges not necessarily through spoken narratives but through embodied knowledge: the textures of a perfectly rolled *bhakri*, the timing of adding spices, the resourcefulness in substituting unavailable ingredients. In this sense, the Dalit kitchen becomes both a gendered and political space, where women's labour resists erasure and asserts cultural continuity under conditions of structural inequality (John, 1996; Rege, 2006).

The Politics of Taste and Purity

Patole challenges the hegemonic discourse that associates upper-caste vegetarian cuisine with notions of ritual purity and Dalit food with ideas of pollution and inferiority. This binary is not simply about dietary preferences; it is deeply symbolic of caste-based discrimination and the social ordering of communities through food practices (Khare, 1992; Srinivas, 2006). In many traditions across India, food is meticulously segregated according to the status of both the eater and the preparer, reflecting entrenched hierarchies of "touchability" and access. Dalit food often meat-based, incorporating foraged greens, coarse grains, and indigenous spices, is historically dismissed as impure or unclean, not because of its nutritional value or flavour, but because of the caste location of its creators (Guru, 2012; Jodhka, 2014).

By meticulously documenting these food traditions, Patole reclaims them as authentic, dignified, and integral to the cultural fabric of Marathwada. His narrative asserts that these dishes are not vestiges of poverty to be

forgotten but repositories of culinary wisdom, ecological adaptation, and communal resilience. In doing so, he engages in an act of epistemic resistance, contesting the exclusionary culinary canon that privileges upper-caste vegetarian gastronomy as the normative aesthetic standard (Appadurai, 1988). Patole also critiques the politics and aesthetics of mainstream food writing, which often exoticizes Dalit culinary practices when convenient presenting them as “rustic” novelties for elite consumption or erases them entirely in favour of sanitized, globalized representations of Indian cuisine (Narayan, 1997). He questions the cultural politics of “good taste,” revealing how it is shaped less by objective sensory evaluation than by caste-inflected judgments about who prepares the food and under what conditions. In reframing Dalit food as a site of dignity and identity, Patole not only confronts the politics of taste but also dismantles the symbolic violence that perpetuates caste hierarchies in everyday eating practices.

Resistance and Reclamation through the Kitchen

In *Dalit Kitchen in Marathwada*, the kitchen becomes a symbolic battleground a contested space where caste boundaries are both reinforced through historical prejudices and challenged through acts of everyday defiance. While dominant narratives have long depicted the kitchen as a space of domesticity and feminine labour, Patole reimagines it as a site of political engagement, where the preparation, consumption, and narration of food become acts of resistance (Rege, 2006; Counihan, 1999). In his telling, the act of cooking certain foods, celebrating them in writing, and serving them with pride is not merely gastronomic it is a deliberate challenge to the entrenched Brahmanical order that historically polices taste, purity, and social interaction.

Patole's text marks a radical departure from the glossy, celebratory cookbooks of India's elite culinary culture, which often present sanitized versions of cuisine stripped of caste and class realities (Appadurai, 1988; Narayan, 1997). Instead, his work functions as a manifesto of culinary assertion. Recipes are not isolated, decontextualized lists of ingredients and instructions; they are embedded within the socio-economic and political contexts of Dalit life. He situates each dish within the lived experiences of scarcity, ecological adaptation, and communal resilience, thereby transforming food from a domestic artifact into a cultural weapon. In this framework, food becomes more than sustenance it becomes a means of resisting erasure, challenging invisibility, and asserting a distinct Dalit presence in the cultural memory of the nation. The simple act of eating especially foods historically stigmatized by caste ideology becomes a declaration of identity, autonomy, and rejection of caste-based

subjugation. Through this reclamation, Patole demonstrates that the kitchen can function simultaneously as a site of historical oppression and as a crucible for forging political consciousness and collective dignity (Guru, 2012; Teltumbde, 2018).

Language, Style, and Oral Tradition

Patole writes in Marathi, employing colloquial expressions, regional idioms, and the earthy cadences of everyday speech, grounding *Dalit Kitchen in Marathwada* firmly within the vernacular experience of his community. This linguistic choice is not incidental it is a deliberate act of cultural and political resistance. By refusing to adopt the sanitized, standardized registers often associated with English translations or elite Marathi prose, Patole preserves the texture of Dalit speech, resisting the erasure and domestication of subaltern voices that can occur through processes of linguistic “purification” and upper-caste appropriation (Spivak, 1993; Omvedt, 1994). The use of the vernacular allows the text to resonate with the rhythms of oral tradition, drawing on storytelling patterns, communal conversation, and memory transmission. These oral qualities situate Patole's work within a long lineage of Dalit testimonial writing, where personal narrative and collective history intertwine (Rege, 2006). The narrative voice moves fluidly between the sensuous descriptions of food its aromas, textures, and tastes and the stark, often brutal realities of caste oppression. This stylistic interplay mirrors the lived experience of Dalit communities, where moments of culinary joy are inseparable from the socio-economic conditions that shape them. Patole's prose is evocative, intimate, and at times lyrical. The food descriptions evoke sensory pleasure and cultural pride, while the surrounding narratives anchor these pleasures in contexts of deprivation, resilience, and systemic discrimination. This duality of tenderness alongside defiance, nostalgia alongside political critique gives the narrative its emotional and rhetorical power. In blending the aesthetics of food writing with the urgency of social commentary, Patole disrupts the apolitical tendencies of mainstream gastronomic literature, positioning the kitchen not only as a site of memory but also as a space of ideological contestation (Guru, 2012; Teltumbde, 2018).

Gendered Labour and Culinary Creativity

While Patole centers his narrative around his own lived experiences, he foregrounds the indispensable role of women in shaping and sustaining Dalit food traditions. The everyday labour of Dalit women gathering firewood, foraging for seasonal greens, grinding coarse grains, cooking over open fires, and serving meals illustrates the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; Rege, 2006). These women work within conditions of

chronic scarcity, their labour often unrecognized in both domestic spaces and cultural histories. Yet, in Patole's account, they emerge as central figures in the culinary heritage of Dalit communities, their contributions integral to the survival and identity of the group. Patole's narrative refuses the erasure of these women from literary and historical memory. By documenting their culinary practices, he not only records recipes but also preserves the social contexts that give them meaning. The women's creativity under pressure transforming coarse grains, foraged greens, wild tubers, and inexpensive cuts of meat into nourishing and flavourful meals reflects both resourcefulness and innovation. In doing so, they enact a form of quiet resistance against the material deprivation imposed by caste hierarchies and economic marginalization (Guru, 2012).

Patole elevates this creativity to a form of cultural artistry, countering the invisibilities of female labour in both culinary and literary domains. His work aligns with feminist scholarship in food studies, which frames cooking as an embodied practice of knowledge transmission, identity formation, and community resilience (Counihan, 1999; Avieli, 2018). By positioning Dalit women's food labour as a site of dignity, skill, and cultural production, Patole disrupts dominant narratives that have historically relegated their work to the realm of the "ordinary" or "unskilled." Instead, he renders it visible as an essential thread in the tapestry of Dalit cultural memory.

Situating Patole within Dalit and Food Literature

Dalit Kitchen in Marathwada occupies a distinctive and important position in Indian literature. It includes multiple genres autobiography, ethnography, oral history, and food writing while remaining firmly grounded in a Dalit epistemology that resists Brahmanical frameworks of knowledge production (Guru, 2002; Rege, 2006). Patole's narrative extends the legacy of Dalit autobiographical traditions pioneered by writers such as Baburao Bagul, Omprakash Valmiki, and Bama, who mobilized personal life stories to expose the structural violence of caste and to affirm the dignity of marginalized lives (Bagul, 1992; Valmiki, 2003; Bama, 2000). Like these predecessors, Patole transforms the intimate details of his own experience into a politically charged narrative, using the texture of daily life here, the kitchen and the dining plate as a lens for social critique. At the same time, Patole's work makes a vital intervention in the expanding field of food studies in India, a field that has historically been dominated by upper-caste voices and perspectives (Appadurai, 1988; Khare, 1992). Mainstream food writing in India often privileges the culinary practices of dominant castes, treating them as normative and representative of "authentic" Indian cuisine, while Dalit food cultures are either erased or

exoticized. By centering the Dalit experience and culinary memory, Patole disrupts this imbalance, democratizing the discourse around food, taste, and tradition. In doing so, he challenges the implicit hierarchies of culinary heritage questioning who gets to define it, whose food is documented, and whose tastes are legitimized. Patole's account expands the archive of Indian food writing to include ingredients, cooking methods, and cultural contexts often excluded from elite gastronomic narratives. He redefines culinary heritage not as a static repository of recipes sanctioned by dominant groups, but as a living, contested, and inclusive cultural practice shaped by the resilience, creativity, and survival strategies of Dalit communities. In this way, *Dalit Kitchen in Marathwada* is not only a work of personal testimony but also a significant contribution to both Dalit literature and the critical study of Indian food cultures.

CONCLUSION

Shahu Patole's *Dalit Kitchen in Marathwada* is more than a literary text; it is a socio-political document, a culinary memoir, and a cultural manifesto. It dismantles the common misconception that food is a neutral or apolitical domain, revealing instead how culinary practices are deeply enmeshed in the structures of caste power, exclusion, and resistance. By situating recipes alongside personal anecdotes, oral histories, and socio-political commentary, Patole transforms the kitchen from a private, domestic space into a stage for public memory and political expression. In Patole's telling, the humble Dalit kitchen becomes an archive of lived histories each dish carrying the weight of deprivation, adaptation, and defiance. The act of cooking, eating, and sharing food is not merely a matter of sustenance; it becomes a mode of reclaiming cultural identity and asserting the dignity of a community long silenced by hegemonic narratives. His work dismantles the ideological constructs that frame upper-caste vegetarianism as "pure" and Dalit foodways as "polluted," instead celebrating the creativity, nutritional wisdom, and cultural depth embedded in marginalized cuisines.

By reclaiming the Dalit kitchen, Patole reclaims voice, agency, and historical presence for his community. His text challenges dominant food writing's aesthetics of erasure and exoticization, insisting that the politics of the plate be taken seriously as a site of scholarship, solidarity, and social transformation. *Dalit Kitchen in Marathwada* thus stands not only as a valuable contribution to Dalit literature and Indian food studies but also as a compelling call for readers, scholars, and culinary enthusiasts to engage with the complex, resilient, and evolving food traditions

that flourish on the margins and to recognize them as central to the story of India itself.

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