

# GOVERNMENT BRAHMANA

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*Orient Longman*

## 18 Marxism and the plate after the meal

Hey boy,  
The meal plate  
Without bones or meat.  
Hey, creature of reservation,  
This is lavish food.  
Boiled with ghee,  
Made of milk.  
Smell the fragrance, isn't it nice?  
Ayyo,  
Just ingu!<sup>1</sup>

Whatever one says, we tend to show ourselves off as more than who we actually are. This can easily be termed as madness! And I think it is the most appropriate word. I too have behaved like that before. But when I began to be bothered by a feeling of guilt I tried to keep away from such things, and I try even now. I have changed my opinion that such an attitude is prevalent only among the first generation of educated people in a community.

Am I a suspicious creature? I have asked myself this many times. Certain instances and situations drive one to be suspicious of one's surroundings. Doubts do not just remain doubts!

1. Ingu or asafoetida is used by brahmins, whereas the other castes use garlic to add flavour.

When this is the case, how can I admit that I am a suspicious creature? Why do I not feel suspicious of my well-wishers? Why does the feeling raise its head only with a few people?

Such questions have tormented me. I try to avoid most of the dinner invitations that I receive (except those from dalits). I do not have any doubts about some of my progressive intellectual friends. Though I often gear myself up to declare my caste, there are times when I have remained mute. I have gone to my friends' houses honouring their invitations. When the elders of the house initially speak about this and that and finally broach enquiries about my caste, I turn cold. My attempts at changing the topic would be ignored. In order to avoid these circumstances I try to evade my friends' invitations under one pretext or another. But there are some friends who have mistaken me for this. I fail to understand how best I can reciprocate their goodwill and friendship.

One day I fell into the trap quite easily. It was longstanding invitation. Every time he met me he used to say, 'You people should walk hand in hand with progressive thinkers. Two hands should join together in order to make a loud clap. Only then can revolution take place. You should mingle with us. Just literature is not enough, my boy. Life should be reflected in your writings.' Since I looked upon him as my senior, an experienced writer and a progressive thinker, I just nodded saying 'Yes sir.'

Once he caught hold of me in his town by accident. He dragged me to his house, like he was dragging a dog by its collar. All along the way, he kept saying,

'Mine is an inter-caste marriage, do you know?

She is not at home...

You can taste delicious food cooked by my own hands.

Your slim body will puff up at the mere fragrance of the food...

He began serving me the food.

'There is no dining table at home.

The floor will have to do.'



He made me sit on a mat spread on the floor of the outer room and started serving food.

Not used to food spiced with ingu, I ate with great difficulty, controlling my nausea.

'No chicken bones like in your house, boy!

We are quite strict regarding food,

In other things we are normal, simple...reformists...'

A cold churning began inside me. I am different from you, my culture is different—is this what he is saying? I wondered. But since the influence of his personality was so strong, his words did not quite seem like provocation.

Immediately after lunch he said, 'My wife is not at home, I told you that, didn't I? We should wash our plates.' He sniggered. I too echoed his snigger. 'I too stay alone. Don't I wash my plates at my house?' Having said that, I went out to wash my plate. Is this also a common communist attribute? Of course, he washed his plate too and kept it in the room where we had dined. I placed my washed plate next to his. His son – who had not participated in the happenings so far – started moving about in the house. It was a Sunday. After a while the boy took the utensils his father had used inside. Mine stayed where I had left them!

I was physically seated there, but my mind was wandering elsewhere. Our discussion about reforms, pro-dalit literature, etc. proceeded unhindered. He kept talking. My mind was entirely on the issue of the plates. Our discussion of more than two and a half hours started appearing barren to me. Dusk made way to darkness. The utensils I had used remained outside still. They never entered the house. I came out of the house. My stomach was empty again. Even more hungry was my brain.

Throughout the bus journey, I was reminded of what my aayi had said...the procedure related to cow dung and cow's urine...

If a dalit happened to touch an upper caste person's vessel, it had to be smeared with cow dung and burnt in fire. It would

then be immersed in a solution of tamarind and salt. Afterwards, it would be immersed in cow's urine, and only then would it be placed along with the other vessels of the house. How much more pleasant is the touch of cow's urine than that of an untouchable human being!

Such treatment was reserved for brass vessels. Earthenware would be given away to dalits with contempt. Or else, such earthen pots would be kept outside the door for such people, as if they were being kept for dogs. The same manner in which separate cups and saucers are kept for untouchables in hotels! Surprisingly, such practices are still alive amongst us!

All these images started performing a deadly dance in my mind. I reached home wondering about the fate of the vessels I had used and washed. You tell me now, when I have to face such situations, how can I accept invitations without any reservations? There are numerous instances of this kind. This is just one example.



## 19 The plaintain leaf that keeps pestering me

I do not need to explain here the importance of plantain leaves that are used for serving food in Mangalore and its surrounding areas. One day I had a sudden revelation about the plantain leaf. Since that day my mind gets troubled over food served on plantain leaves. At the meals at other people's houses, I ask for a plate before they can serve me on the leaf. Many of my friends have asked me the reason for my choice. Though the issue is uppermost in my mind, I am unable to put it across to them. Perhaps they assume that I do not know how to eat on a plantain leaf. Of course, some people ask me directly, 'Why? Is it because it's brahminical?'

Yes! I did not know how to eat on a plantain leaf! Leave alone eating, I did not even know that we have to clean the leaf properly before eating. We were not used to it at all. Initially, I was under the impression that only people who do not have plates use leaves.

But when I came to Mangalore, I started enjoying food served on plantain leaves. The leaf given to me would tear into strips when I cleaned it. In spite of my care and caution, this blunder would take place repeatedly. People laying the leaves for the guests would stare at me. I would wear a hard expression on my face to suggest that the leaf had been already torn when it was laid for me. Gradually I mastered the art of cleaning the plantain leaf. Another technique was to fold the four corners of the leaf and make it into a plate. Most of the time I failed in my attempts and people laughed at me. Later it became a pleasure for me to eat on the plantain leaf.



Sometimes I felt that it must have definitely been some lazy person's idea. The work involved is simple—spread the leaf, use it and throw it away. No need to scrub or wash! If food is served on a plate, at least four small bowls are needed apart from the plate. Who wants to wash all that? And in the first place, buy all that?! Probably no one wanted to take such pains! I had this suspicion while in Mangalore, when I gave up using plantain leaves and reverted to plates.

I was delivering a lecture on *Malegalalli Madumagalu*, a novel written by Kuvempu. In that novel, there is an instance of a plantain leaf meal. A Christian priest comes home for a meal. As he is considered lower than an untouchable, questions arise: Should he be served food in the open verandah outside the house? In which leaf should he be served? And who should serve the food? A discussion takes place between different members of the family regarding such matters. I was surprised to know how the status of a human being determines even the part of the plantain leaf that would be laid for him!

I brought up the matter for discussion in the class. Some other alarming matters came to light—regarding the use of areca leaves for serving food, about the areca nut and hombale, the areca flower. Different parts of the same leaf are earmarked for different uses—the best parts of the leaf go to the gods or the brahmins and the lowest part is reserved for the untouchables. This took me back to the myth of the birth of men: brahmins were born from the head of the god Vishnu, kshatriyas from his shoulders, vaishyas from his belly and the shudras from his feet. How seamlessly the vedic proposition has been adopted while dividing even the plantain leaf!

After the discussion about the plantain leaf in the class, I felt like I had just received a fresh wound from yet another fall. I began to recollect the plantain leaf meals I have had. I recalled from my memory those meals those houses where I had been given the end part of the plantain leaf. Did they also eat from similar parts of the plantain leaf? Or, was that part of the leaf given only to me? Such questions started dancing in my mind.

They made me suspect even my close friends. Though I consoled myself by deciding to test them when they called me home again, my heart was not relieved of its burden.

Old memories surfaced. 'Yes! In that house, when I said that the plantain leaf given to me was torn and asked for a plate, they gave me another leaf but not a plate. Why?' This matter tormented my mind relentlessly for a number of days. And the mental conflict continues still. If this issue of eating off a plantain leaf is from the past, some of my recent experiences of eating from the leaf make for another story. The class roused suspicions in me and I suffered on that account. I used to eat regularly at a hotel. The server would usually give me the lower part of the leaf, as he gave to many others. After this incident, I became filled with anxiety and doubt.

Has he come to know my caste?

Why does he bring the end part of the leaf every time?

The best part of the leaf never comes to me!

Not even once! Does the leaf too know my caste?

I cannot answer such questions. I am sure others cannot answer them either. However transparent their answers, would my doubting mind believe? No. This kind of subtle discrimination, without even a tinge of untouchability, will probably haunt me like a ghost till the very end of my life. Relief from this seems impossible.

After a few days, I came to a decision to avoid the humiliation of having food on a plantain leaf—I swore to myself that I would only use plates to eat. But only I know how far I have been able to keep to my promise. Friends of mine who have been puzzled by my preference for plates may find an answer here.

The reason for giving up the plantain leaf meal is not just that it amounts to being brahminical. There are folk tales to prove that people of the lower caste followed the practice of eating on plantain leaves. And all this confusion in between!

What are the types and parts of leaves on which the servant of the house is served?

Try to find out for yourself.

You would be amused at the varieties!