5. ALL THAT WE EAT OR DON'T EAT – A TRIPTYCH

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I

Four days after being admitted to a hospital in Kolkata, my father died. It was a Sunday. February 06, 1998, to be precise. I was in the middle of my standard seven half yearly exams. The day he was admitted, I was writing one. In those four days, though both my mother and I were constantly in touch with his doctor, we did not visit him in the hospital for a number of reasons. First, the doctor had repeatedly assured us that it was an attack of malaria (something very routine in my congested old Kolkata where I happen to inhabit a century old dark and damp house. My father already had already had it twice, my mother thrice since then and I a total of five times in my 28 years) and that he would be alright in a week. Moreover, his friends were keeping him company. Also, during exams I would often become nauseous with fear and needed constant attention. So I had not allowed my mother to leave my side. Then, when on Sunday evening, we received a call that his condition was deteriorating, it felt like a bolt from the blue. My mother went. I stayed home, trying hard to study. By 10pm, it was all over.

That very morning, my mother had woken me up saying that she had been particularly lucky at the fish market. She had got fresh prawns at an unbelievably low price. I immediately sprung up from the bed, my grey mindscape now a riot of colours. She deveined them quickly while I grated the coconut. She made a fine paste of coconut with mustard, poppy seeds and cumin. I dunked the prawns in vinegar. Suddenly she said, "Enough… now go and study!" I smiled and left the kitchen. The C++ and BASIC programs floated with an aroma of freshly ground chillies and garlic. Lunch was heavenly. The doctor informed us that my father had taken a light lunch and that morning had assiduously debated the Pokhran blasts with him.

Back then, we used to live in a joint family. The kitchen was common but because both my parents and I felt that the food cooked was quite bland, my mother always cooked some extra dishes to add that zing to daily meals. My aunt cooked something

extra for my uncle and cousin too. There were times when my cousin and I used to try and make each other jealous over who had had the best meals.

Within minutes of the final call from the hospital, my aunt, in an almost automated mode, quickly opened our fridge to check what food was inside. Portions of the prawn saved for dinner, rice, eggs kept for the day after were all taken out, wrapped in polythene and sent off outside the house. She did the same with the food she had cooked too. The mandatory rituals had set in. The night passed… absolute silence pierced by the sound of stray dogs barking. The hearse arrived the next morning. The verandahs overflowing to witness the spectacle… it is all hazy in my mind except for that one steely glance from my mother and her resolute voice saying, "My son is not going for the cremation. Someone else can perform the last rites." Today when I think of that particular day, I am still filled with wonder and awe, even in a moment of absolute grief, my mother had been in such control. She thought that my psyche would be scarred permanently by the sights and sounds of a burial ghat[1] — and went against the entire family to stand her ground despite being subjected to nasty comments, which I realize today, were a show of brahminical patriarchy in its most naked form.

What remains a knot for me to this day is the intense guilt, which my mother felt while eating fish and meat at a family gathering[2]. The same woman who had defied many a norm extolled my uncles for allowing her to eat non-vegetarian dishes at home. She felt that it was her duty to not embarrass them in public and hence if there was any marriage party or any social gathering, she would automatically walk towards the vegetarian counters. For at least two years after my father's death, she had refused to attend any functions, lest someone told her to stay far from the ceremonies. I pleaded, shouted, begged and cried to make her do otherwise. When all else failed, I resorted to plain and simple blackmailing. I stopped attending these functions. It worked. Today I am not too sure of my behavior. I have theoretical tools today to explain benign forms of patriarchies, of hierarchies imbued in acts of kindness, of years of cultural conditioning and how the female agency negotiates all of this, but back then all I cared for was the restoration of our lives to how it was before my father's death. It took me some years to realize that it would never be the same.

Back then my mother had refused to wear red (not that any of our 'progressive' family members ever gifted her anything with a dash of red after that day in 1998) saying it was not proper. Today she says that the colour does not suit her age anymore. Brown, grey, blue, these are more like her, she claims. I let her be. While I can keep talking about my issues with her, I end this segment with a little incident from a few days ago.

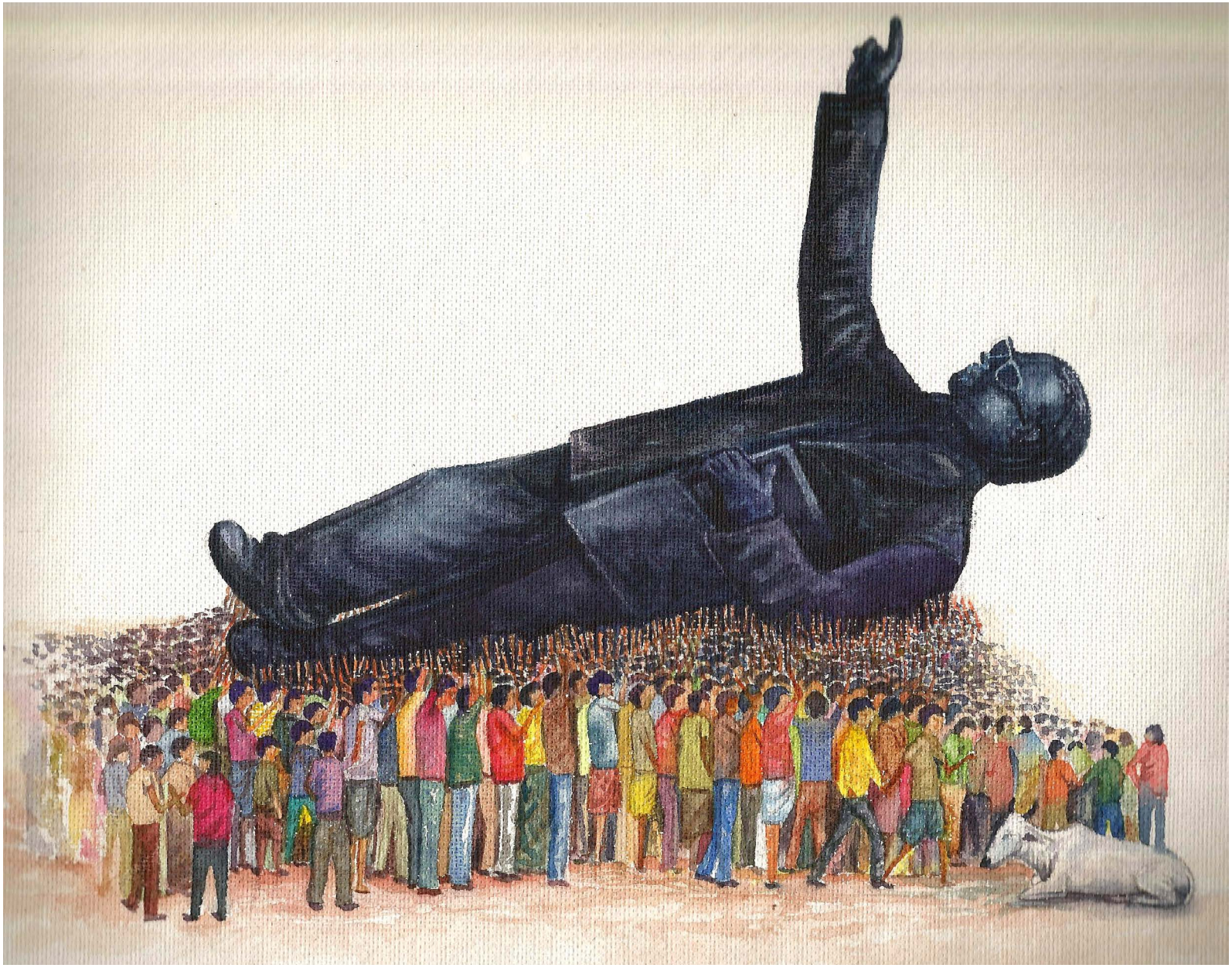
My mother's recent blood reports are not too good. Her triglyceride and sugar counts have shot up. We were returning from her physician's. Both of us were hungry. A small Tibetan shack was on our way. We went in and ordered a plate of steamed momos, the doctor's staccato voice mouthing dietary restrictions buzzing in my ears. I have this habit of discreetly watching what others are eating at the tables around me, and I often end up grumbling over having chosen the wrong dishes for myself. So there I found a plate of piping hot chilly pork, resplendent with yellow and red bell peppers at a table nearby. I suddenly had a craving for it and ordered it as well. It soon arrived, the pork fat floating in oil, the chilly seeds looking like forbidden islands. All the while I had not noticed my mother shooting me disapproving glances. Regardless, I forked a sliver of fat and felt absolute bliss as it melted in my mouth. . It felt like nothing could go wrong with life. Suddenly I saw another fork and another sliver going up. My mother said, "I think I don't mind pork. It's soft. We should come here often."

Tomorrow is another day.

II

I took to eating beef in university. It was like a rite of passage for the Bengali in me, who has intellectual pretensions/ambitions and who loves his Murakami, Kafka and Nabarun. You start by washing down your Old Monk rum or beer with the hard and chewy beef steak at Olypub, dirty and dank but one of Kolkata's heritage bars. Since then I have graduated to other beef dishes in other places. While I prefer pork to beef, it was always immensely satisfying to give my extended family the shock of their lives by telling them that I ate all kinds of meat. As if not going through the rituals of donning the 'sacred thread'[3], was not enough. But in my circle of friends, eating beef is not seen as making any kind of

statement. So, when I first came to know of a beef festival at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences in Kolkata, I could not foresee the Pandora's box it would open. So far I had heard of right wing protests in the English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi during beef festivals but why should there be any problem in the fairly liberal Bengal? Casteism is not rampant here, I thought (manifested only during stiff opposition to inter-caste marriages). However as the event coincided with a term paper presentation, I was unable to attend it. As a contributing editor of a monthly magazine, I commissioned my classmate to report on it. What I heard from her and later from other students at that academic space shocked me.



Firstly there was a clear line of division between the teaching and non teaching staff. The latter refused to allow the canteen space to be used for cooking beef. Some even threatened to start Saraswati Puja[4], from the next year to stop such evils on campus. They refused to lend their utensils for cooking. On the other hand, while many teachers and students remained silent through all this, many of them lent their support. Some raised the red flags of environmentalism and Buddhism (an irony there, isn't it? But then our history books rarely tell us that Babasaheb Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, much less about why he did

so), clearly ignoring the fact that there was no pressure on anyone to eat beef the day. Ignored too was the fact that beef was the cheapest item of food for many Dalits, food that nourished them. Moreover, those who expressed solidarity towards the festival could eat the vegetarian dishes on offer. Many of the faculty members were present; some helped students to put up posters, one even drew cartoons on casteism. The whole incident generated quite a few questions for me and I was lucky enough to observe some rich discussions and debates around caste, which has been often missing in the Bengal academia. Thirty-four years of Left rule ensured that we only discussed class!

Questions like whether reservation policies were being implemented in educational spaces and how the Bengali *bhadralok*[5] fashionably showed off his progressive and superior cultural credentials by consuming beef stayed away from the act of eating the same meat, now imbued with Ambedkarite politics, as if culture can be separated from politics, as if there is no ideological mooring to culture. The media did not cover the story (except that one report in the magazine I work for). These discussions opened a whole new world for me. My lens of viewing religious Marxists, perceiving jokes on campus about 'funny surnames' and 'first generation learners lacking pronunciation skills' changed (it was no more about elitism only)[6]. What struck me was the deafening silence around discourses on caste in Bengal, where on campuses we read a lot more about Black feminism than about Dalit feminism, where class (and to some extent gender) seem to be the only frameworks for analyzing oppression.

It's been half a year since the festival. Since then, I hope to have learned to take a more nuanced approach to understanding caste dynamics in this state (where the majority of the Dalit population does not consume beef for many a historical reason[7] and hence to expect a beef festival to have political valence for them may be short sighted), how differently it plays out here than, say in Uttar Pradesh and hence the impossibility of a monolithic narrative. It all began with that one beef festival.

III

It has been three months since I joined Sappho for Equality (SFE) as a member. SFE is eastern India's only advocacy forum for lesbian and bisexual women and transmen and is open to individuals of all genders and sexualities for membership, for anybody who believes in the rights of LBT people. Many of its members were dear friends already, so membership was but a natural progression for me. SFE has many rules and protocols for its regular functioning, one of which is a weekly meeting on Thursday evenings, where members are expected to meet and various issues are hotly debated and discussed and courses of action are thrashed out. However, the reason that merits these Thursday meetings' positioning in this essay is an integral part of these evenings, an aspect without which the meetings would lose a vital political edge.

And that is the bowls of puffed rice, mixed with chopped onions and chillies, peanuts and a few drops of mustard oil served with a samosa or an onion pakora[8]. Each participant gets a bowl. Members sit in a circle and talk while Uma Ray (Uma*di* to everybody) comes with a tray carrying these colourful china bowls. The chatter mixes with the sound of us munching the crispy puffed rice and that's how a Thursday meeting at SFE is made. From the associate professor at a reputed university to a nineteen year old who has just stepped into college, from the woman who has just come from her Zumba class by car to the one who commutes by local train every day, everybody, irrespective of their class positions, their cultural capital sits and eats the humble puffed rice together. So then, for those few hours, the puffed rice becomes the great leveler. The black coffee, green tea, the road side tea in earthen cups, the cotton kurtis, boots, the synthetic saris, plastic chappals and every other marker of one's class position jostles outside the meeting hall. For now, at this very moment of collective eating we become non-hierarchical, perhaps even equal. Though this moment lasts for a few hours, it does not become any less special because it talks of other possibilities, perhaps impossible to realize, yet they all seem immensely possible for that brief moment.

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for too many communal flare-ups, there is an undercurrent of hostility towards Muslims in Kolkata and many other pockets of the state. For instance, this writer has several Muslim friends who have failed to find houses on rent in the city of Kolkata and who have been forced to settle in Muslim dominated spaces, which is then pejoratively termed as 'a ghetto mentality' in many Hindu households. Thus the threat of Saraswati puja is not only casteist, it is also an attempt to 'cleanse' the space of customs marked by Muslims and to preempt such initiatives further.

5. The Bengali term for the gentleman. It has taken on a whole new political meaning in post colonial academia where the Bengali gentleman is often presented as someone who thinks he is culturally superior to his counterparts elsewhere in the country. This sense of superiority often reeks of class, caste capital. On the bhadralok's equation with gender and nationalism, Partha Chatterjee's works are quite illuminative.

6. This writer has witnessed how first generation learners have been derided for their pronunciation skills in elite academic institutions both by teachers and other students. While such attitude reeks of elitism, it is important to note the casteism in such behaviour because the students at the receiving end are mostly from the subordinate castes. Often discussions around merit v/s affirmative action are deliberately held before them to mark them off as undeserving of the seats in the classroom!

7. The history of Dalit practices is extremely complex and varied across the country. For instance, in eastern India, some Dalit cultures have been associated with Vaishnavism and hence the avoidance of beef. While many Dalits converted to Islam and took to beef eating, those who did not choose to convert differentiate themselves from the Dalit Muslims by not consuming beef. These were some discussions that came up as well during the debates around the beef festival.

8. Both fried snacks

Endnotes

1. The place by the river where the funeral rites of Hindus are performed.

2. Widows from the dominant castes have been traditionally not allowed to eat fish, eggs and meat. With upward mobility, some subordinate castes too took on these brahminical patriarchal practices.

3. The *janau* ceremony (referred to as *poite* in Bengali) is a ritual that marks a boy's formal entry into Brahminism, the dominant caste in India. The *janau* is the thread that the Brahmin is supposed to always don as a mark of his caste privilege.

4. Saraswati is the goddess of learning in the Hindu pantheon. Beef is regarded as the staple diet of not only Dalits but also of Muslims. Though Bengal of postcolonial India is not known

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