Do you eat in the shadow
of your thigh?

The Bite Counters

Buy a little rice.
Cook it in a big mud pot.
Serve with watery soup.
Serve in one big common dish.

Sit on your haunches to dine.
Count how many bites
each one has had.
Fight bitterly
if you have had
only one bite,
the others
two.

Festive Food

Charge yourself
with energy
despite staying awake
throughout the night.
Be excited, eager
to go to the houses
of the upper caste
Kilwadis, Marathas, Brahmins,
to beg
for festive food.

You might have built a compound
around the Kilwadi woman's
chilli crop last year
all alone.
Since the bitch
hasn't even
pissed on your hands,
don't spare her today.
Demand food to last you
for three whole days.

You might have laboured
in the upper castes' fields,
woven baskets
of various shapes
and sizes for them,
performed the customary Mahar
duties
such as beating the dhol,
disposing off dead animals,
reaching messages.
Ask to be compensated
for your work.

Food might never be scarce
in your house.
You might have cooked
plenty of mutton and chicken
and a big potful of rice
in your house
and vadas of chickpea flour.
Still, go begging
as a matter of right.
Carry baskets on your head
to collect the leftovers
that might be given to you.

Don't let Baba come to know,
for he will get mad,
shout at you
for behaving like a beggar.
He might threaten you
never to show your face
to him again
if you dare to bring
any such food
into his house.
Lean against the door
holding your pallav to your
mouth.
Try to hide your amused laughter.

Tell the children
to convince their father
that they want to eat sweet
chapattis.

That is why you need to go
begging.
Ignore the fact that you never
get sweet chapattis,
only stale pieces of bhakri or rice.

Go to far-flung houses
carrying separate containers
for collecting various dishes.
But the Kulwadi women,
who give you food
might pour everything together
in a basket.
Dal, vegetables, kheer
poured on the rice
in a mixed mound.

Bring back this basketful of rice
mixed with many things
Hold it against running water
in the river
to stop the rice from going rancid.
Shake it, rinse it
till only the clean rice
remains in the basket.
Sometimes wash the rice at home.
Pour the insipid cooked rice
in an earthen pot.
Put the stove on low heat.

Your entire house
might survive
for two days
on these leftovers.

Saar

While rich people
may store
sode, tisrya, mule,
store the water
in which these fish
have been boiled.
Boil the stock
till it becomes
thick like sauce.
Store it in bottles.

When the menfolk
go out
and you remain at home,
dine only on this sauce.
Pour a small quantity
in water.
Cook it as a soup,
saar,
with chilli powder, salt,
a piece of raw mango
or amsul.
Eat your rice
without a complaint
with this watery dish.

It might invariably
upset you stomach.
Face the consequences.
Ignore the funny
'dug dug' noise,
the foul smell
spreading all over.
Pull your short sari
down to your feet
to hide what is
tricking down
from your butt.

Dinner

If the talathi in the village
insists
that you dine
at his place,
try to fend him off.
If he does not listen,
accept the invitation.

Send your peon ahead
to see where
the house is located.
The peon might instead
perform his first duty
of telling the talathi
your caste.

When you arrive for dinner,
you might be given
a lukewarm welcome.
You might be served food
on a plantain leaf
in the verandah
covered with dirt and filth,
shoes and chappals,
goat droppings
strewn all around.

Ask the talathi
where your peon is.
He might tell you
the peon will come
later.
Glance
inside the house.
You might see the peon
sitting inside
eating his meal.

Try not to feel
as if someone
has thrown acid
on your face.
The acid of humiliation.

Turn your back
that very instant.
Resign from your job.
Vow never to go back
to a village.

Biryani

If your Muslim neighbours
offer you some biryani,
eat it with relish.
If your brother hesitates,
complains,
"it contains beef",
remind him
that we have eaten
even a dead bull.

Chicken

Cook chicken
on the stove
to cook on low heat
all night.
Prepare some ghavans.
Pack the ghavans
and chicken
in a tiffin box.
When your son
is about to leave
in the morning,
hold it out to him.
If he refuses,
hand it to his wife.
Tell her to give it to him.
Your son might repeat
endlessly
what had happened to him before
until his bus is out of sight.

Relive the time
he appeared
for his matriculation
and you had packed
some ghavans and chicken
in a plantain leaf for him
to take in the bus
to his hostel.
On hearing the hostel
was in a brahmin lane
he had given your
tasty chicken dish
to a coolie
to protect himself.
When the boys at the hostel
had come to know of it
they got very angry,
having not seen
even the feather
of a hen
for ages.

Grieve over this
for a long time.

from Urmila Pawar's 'Aaydan: The Weave of my Life'
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