

With Dalit Foods, Chandrabhan Prasad looks to conquer caste prejudice

Dalit entrepreneur Chandrabhan Prasad is starting an e-commerce food business under the name Dalit Foods, challenging the social glass ceiling

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LIVE MINT

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Chandrabhan Prasad of Dalit Foods. Photo: Dalit Foods website

New Delhi: In November 2015, around 100 children left a school in Karnataka, refusing to eat food prepared by a Dalit cook. In January, two upper-caste villagers refused to eat sweets served at a Republic Day function at a Madhya Pradesh school, saying they had been contaminated by a Dalit student touching them.

The two real-life anecdotes call to mind the metaphor of “touch” used by Mulk Raj Anand in his book *Untouchable* to convey the sense of alienation felt by the lower castes.

When the protagonist, Bakha, realizes that he is an untouchable, he becomes acutely aware of the nature of touch. The only time an upper caste touches him is to hurt him. The book is set in pre-independence India.

To be sure, things have changed. India has Dalit millionaires—entrepreneurs who have entered businesses across sectors and don't require to reveal their caste. The once strong connection between caste and occupation has indeed loosened.

Yet, even today, Dalits find it extremely hard to venture into the food and food-processing industries because people are still conscious of the caste of the person preparing their food or even serving it.

Chandrabhan Prasad, a Dalit entrepreneur and adviser to the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, is starting an e-commerce food business under the name Dalit Foods, which will test that premise.

Prasad says it is a social experiment to find out whether there are any takers for Dalit food in India and if India has really transformed from a country where people thoroughly cleaned the kitchen if a Dalit even stepped into it to one in which people would buy food items knowing they are manufactured by Dalits.

The choice of the business name—Dalit Foods—holds significance. It is equivalent to making a political statement in a country where the Dalit has emerged as a political category.

“So far, Dalit manufacturers remained nameless while their products were branded and sold by others as their own. Now, we are branding Dalit products, and according them direct market access,” says Prasad.

The entry into the food business and the intentional revelation of caste in doing so also holds a symbolic significance. Vani Subramanian, who directed the documentary *Stir. Fry. Simmer*, which examines how food practices perpetuate differences and hierarchies, says, “It is a brave step and the results of this will be telling. It is a way of asserting the caste from a position of what is understood as a weakness. It is a time when we are all called out on widespread prejudice and on our sense of caste.”

From “Brahmin sambar powder” to food outlets carrying signs making it clear they are run by the upper castes to caste-based cookery books (*Why Onions Cry: Peek into an Iyengar Kitchen*), as Subramanian says, “so much of our prejudice is enacted through food”.

When Bengaluru-based Dalit millionaire Raja Nayak was expanding his business, he started a packaged water unit. He recalls stories his parents narrated about how members of his community were not allowed to fetch water from the same source as the upper castes.

When you have money, caste becomes irrelevant, he says.

“When the upper caste buy my water, do they know an untouchable is selling them this?” asks Nayak.

But for Prasad, the plan is different. He says even though Dalits have started working together with other communities and many entrepreneurs have entered the market, it is time for Dalits to openly declare their identity. “Why do we hide our identity? It is time we integrate with the society in a real sense.”

He chose e-commerce primarily because of money constraints. “We believe we don’t get access to market. If we intend to enter the retail market, we have to be ready to pay for it. For now, this is all I can afford,” says Prasad, who began this business with Rs.5 lakh in investment.

The business is limited to Delhi at the moment, and expansion will depend on customer response.

The website, which is very basic and unpretentious, lists mango pickle, turmeric, flax seeds, coriander and red chilli among the products it sells—staples in any Indian kitchen.

“We have a special turmeric which is grown in water-deficient Wardha district of Maharashtra. The coriander is from Bundelkhand. The red chilli is from Mathania in Rajasthan,” says Prasad.

“The mango pickle I am selling is not like any other pickle. We don’t use any acid as a preservative. In my community too, there are some who are very poor and have thick chapatis with only red chilli and salt. Those who are relatively better-off use *achar* (pickle). So, *achar* for us, is made in a way that it becomes as good as a *sabzi* (curry),” he adds.

The business is really small-scale and the products limited. The idea is to include the foods Dalits eat and push Dalit cuisine into the mainstream.

He is taking a risk, but Prasad says someone has to test the waters to see if India has indeed become a country where caste is irrelevant.

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