



Dalits, Water And Discrimination

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Abstract

This article examines the discrimination Dalits faces in India in accessing water for drinking, sanitation and agriculture. Ambedkar launched Mahad Sathyagraha to challenge the monopoly of upper caste over a pond. Constitution of India declared water as fundamental right. Yet, even a preliminary examination of the access of water to Dalits informs that Indian upper caste/caste Hindus have hardly changed in their attitude. For water, Dalits either have to fight or face violence and if not be at the mercy of non-Dalits.

Keywords: discrimination, Dalits, water, agriculture

1. Introduction

Life of Hindus from was permeated with the ideas of purity/impurity, from the moment of birth to the moment of death. The Hindu civilisation is sometimes called a civilisation of purity and pollution and the Hindu psyche is believed to be pathologically connected obsessed with them. The idea of purity/impurity is present all over the Hindu society for centuries: in domestic as well as in public life in exchange of food and water, in practice of professions, in kinship and marriage, in religious actions or belief, in temples and monasteries and in myriad different situations and contexts.

In order to provide structure for caste, the builders of caste system have employed natural elements, social norms, religion and abstract ideas. Among many such elements, water takes the centre stage. Water as a source of survival, purity, pollution, source of cleansing or washing sins and as a production of material wealth is prime element in building the Hindu religion and the caste system. It was medium of exclusion and pain, suffering and violence to Dalits. In fact, the abstract idea of untouchability is translated into reality by placing the body of the Panchama, the one who lives in polluted localities, the one who lives in dirt, the one who eats non-vegetarian food, especially dead animals and so on. Such a body cannot be touched as it is polluted. Once the idea of polluted body is constructed, means and mechanisms for keeping those bodies away from people of touchable castes, from sources which are consumed by them and from religion which is practiced by them and from the air which is breathed by them. Thus, water as source of consumption and as a source of worship, it needed to be kept pure, as source of purification, it is need to be kept away from untouchables, as source of production, it needs to be monopolised and to be deprived to Dalits.

Dalits in this country have been facing discrimination in accessing water from both natural (river, lakes, streams and falls) and human made (canals, channels, ponds, wells, hand pumps, taps, water tanks hauled by lorries, tractors and bullock carts) sources of water. Their adherence to the caste norms in accessing the water ensures discrimination and their assertion of rights over water as a common source result in violence.

There is visible difference between rural and urban India in Dalits accessing water. In rural India, wells, ponds, handpumps and taps are existing. All these water sources are controlled by caste Hindus. Dalits and caste Hindus drawing water from one source is quality. In the caste Hindu society, it would never happen. Then the equality in access to water is only to be achieved through providing water in their colonies separately. But Dalits are not getting separate well, water pump and tap connection easily. Even if they do, the well and pump is located in land caste Hindu part of the village and Dalits have to wait for their turn. In case of tap water supply, the water tank management is in the hands of the caste Hindus. Thus, caste Hindus in rural India still maintain monopoly over resources. In urban India, most of Dalits are living in the slums. Water to them is supplied through taps and tanks. It is mostly chlorinated water not purified. The water which is used for bathing by the upper caste and caste Hindus is supplied as drinking water to slums. Untouchability is still practiced in public places in case of drinking water. Water pots placed in government offices and schools, colleges, washing and bathing place and water located in public places like rural bus stands and railway stations are places of atrocities. Some of the age old forms of untouchability such as pouring water from above to the Dalits, two-tumbler system, keeping separate pots in public offices, sprinkling water on the money given by the Dalits in the shop owned by the non-Dalits, pouring water into the folded hands of Dalits when asked for water to quench thirst, pouring water at one end of a kind of wood pipe for the Dalit to drink at the end, pouring water into leaf cup made of palm tree leaves and upper caste and caste/Hindus sprinkling water on their heads, if they came in contact with the Dalit scavenger are still alive and kicking.

Such a discrimination and deprivation of natural common resources to Dalits by using self-ascribed powers faced challenges from the leaders of deprived communities from 19th century onwards. At a time when the shadow of untouchable was considered as sin and pollution, Jyothibha and Savitri Phule have opened the well for Dalits to drink water. In 1927, next major challenge comes from Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Mahad Satyagraha Yatra to the monopoly of upper caste over public utilities like water. In 1923, the Bole Resolution that allowed untouchables to use public tanks, wells, schools and dispensaries was passed by the Legislative Council of Bombay. Following which the Mahad town also passed a resolution allowing Dalits to use water from public wells: Chavadar Tank. In March 1927, two days conference was organised. Ambedkar presided over the second day meeting and decided to march to the Chavadar Tank to drink water. Upper caste who could not stop the march was surprised and angry over this assertion of Dalits. But they were not to keep quiet. They have attacked untouchables with sticks. At least, twenty Dalits were injured. Muslim gave shelter to Dalits while Ambedkar was in police station. The next logical step for the upper caste was to purify the tank with prayers, with 108 pots of cow dung, cow urine, milk, curd and ghee. While the upper caste goes to court to get temporary legal injunction, Ambedkar, as the Chairman of the Mahad Satyagraha Committee organises Dalits and organises the second conference in December. In this conference, Ambedkar along with his followers publicly burns Manusmriti and delivered speech:

This lake at Mahad is public property. The Caste Hindus of Mahad are so reasonable that they not only draw water from the lake themselves but freely permit people of any religion to draw water from it, and accordingly people of the other religions, such as Islam, do make use of this permission. Nor do the caste Hindus prevent members of species considered lower than the human, such as birds and beasts, from drinking at the lake. Moreover, they freely permit beasts kept by untouchables to drink at the lake. The caste Hindus of Mahad prevent the untouchables from drinking the water of the Chavadar Lake not because they suppose that the touch of the untouchables will pollute the water or that it will evaporate and vanish. Their reason for preventing the untouchables from drinking it is that they do not wish to

acknowledge by such permission that caste declared inferior by sacred tradition are in fact their equals. It is not as if drinking the water of the Chavadar Lake will make us immortal. We have survived well enough all these days without drinking it. we are not going to Chavadar lake merely to drink its water. we are going to the lake to assert that we too are human beings like others. It must be clear that this meeting has been called to set up norm of equality

Thus, Ambedkar apart from asserting the right of Dalits to the public water tank through constitutional means. When Dalits were attacked by Caste Hindus, Ambedkar requested Dalits not to retaliate. Though he never expected Gandhi to support the Mahad Satyagraha, Gandhi, as expected, instead of supporting it he was appreciative of Dalits for not retaliating violently and he also advises Dalits not to follow Ambedkar's Satyagraha instead he suggests to follow 'sweet persuasion'. The man who used the same weapon in South Africa and India (Rowlat Satyagraha, 1919 and Non-Cooperation Movement, 1920-22) says that Satyagraha would be Duragraha (evil force) when it is intended to give rude shock to the deep-rooted prejudice of people. When he used the same weapon against the British it was fight for rights but when Dalits uses Satyagraha it would disrupt the prejudice of people that would be bad for Hindu society. In other words, his idea of 'sweet persuasion' i.e., beg or wait for the attitudinal change to take place in the upper caste towards Dalits was the method he thought suitable for Dalits. Ambedkar expected that Gandhi would support the Mahad Satyagraha. But he was not surprised that Gandhi chose to condemn it in strongest terms instead. Gandhi worried that India would be balkanised if Dalits are provided with separate electorate and he blackmailed Ambedkar who was fighting for political equality for Dalits to Ramsay Macdonald's Communal Award. Caste Hindus who live separately from Dalits, in fact, have balkanised the country long ago. Indian village and small towns where Dalits colonies in the village and peri-urban areas and slums in the metropolitan cities is evidence for caste-based-Balkanised India.

Constitution abolishing untouchability, did not mean anything to the upper caste and caste Hindus in this country. untouchability, continues in its pre-modern forms in rural India and it acquired sophisticated forms in urban India. In pre-modern, Dalits were not having rights over common resource. Their access to common resources was at the mercy of the upper caste and caste Hindus. For the first time in India, Article 15, clause (2) sub-clause (b) of the Constitution of India recognised water as fundamental right and its access to be ensured to everyone across castes, race, gender as a public good. Further, Section 3-1(13) of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, says that if a member of non- SC community corrupts or fouls the water of any spring, reservoir or any other source ordinarily used by members of the SCs or STs so as to render it less fit for the purpose which it is ordinarily used, then the person would be punished under this law. This Act and this section in the Act recognised the fact that non-SCs have not changed even after forty years of abolition of untouchability by the constitution and recognised that they intentionally could deprive water to Dalits. However, Dalits were discriminated, denied, humiliated and faced violence and lost life in fighting to access to water. There some major water related violent incidents are recorded in independent India. Incidents of discrimination are countless. But there some incidents where Dalits lost lives in fighting to access to water. There were many minor and some major incidents of violence Dalits faced in accessing water in India. The Karamchedu Massacre (1985) Andhra Pradesh and Khilaranji Massacre (2006) in Maharashtra are two major incidents. The Karamchedu Massacre in Karamchedu Village, Chirala, Prakasam District of the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh in 1985 was a major episode. A pan-India fights for justices led by the Katti Padma Rao and Bojja Tharakam forced the government of India to introduce Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989. While Ambedkar's Mahad Movement was for claiming rights over the natural common resource (water) monopolised and reserved by the upper caste through the application of norms of caste, the Karamchedu Movement was against unchanged attitude of the Caste Hindus who continue to believe that Dalits do not particularly hold rights over anything even on their own lives. They continue to believe that their caste status provides them license to deny rights and humiliate Dalits whenever they wanted. It is not constitution which decides on the lives of Dalits, it is they. Despite separate ponds for caste Hindus and Dalits in Karamchedu, caste Hindu Potina Sreenu and Royaneti Prasad, did not believe that the drinking water

pond of Dalits need not be treated as so. Their caste induced arrogance allowed them decide that drinking water pond of Dalits is for cleaning their male buffalos and washing their dirty buckets. Katthi Chandraiah, Dalit boy who resisted them and Munnangi Suvatha, Dalit women who incidentally came to draw water from tank and defended Chandraiah from caste Hindu men. This courage to question the arrogance of the caste Hindus by these two Dalits has angered Caste Hindus who attacked them and killed at least eight Dalits and injured many.

After Karamchedu, the Khailranji Massacre of Dalit family resulted out of assertion of the family to cultivate their land using the common resource: the public well is another major violence committed on Dalits. The villagers did not allow the family to draw the water from the well and when they assert it as their right access the water, they were murdered by the caste Hindus. Out of five members of the Bhotmange family four of them: mother Surekha, daughter Priyanka (19) and sons Sudhir (17) and Roshan (18) were humiliated, tortured and murdered. Bhayyalal Bhotmange is the only surviving member of the family. Two young boys of the family were asked to gang rape their mother and sister when they refused to do so they were killed. Iron rod and other such things were inserted into private parts of women. Restriction of access to the water is always part of the caste Hindus strategy to counter the assertion of Dalits. They have the ability of monopolising and controlling public utilities in India. Their social position, their social networking, their influence in politics and their ability to influence the bureaucracy always provides advantage to caste Hindus. In North India every time, Dalits asserts their rights, the traditional methods of boycotting invoked. The social boycott in rural North India traditionally means hukka-pani-bandh (no-tobacco and no water) for a person who has annoyed the community. In South India too, the social boycott involves the deprivation of access to public utilities like water. Though Ambedkar clearly saw the difference between North and south in many aspects and accorded all positive civilisational qualities to the South, there seems to be pan-Indianness in practice of untouchability. Perhaps, degree of incidents and notoriety of practices are less in South compare to the North. But it needs to be substantiated with evidence. Water related atrocities on Dalits in South India seems to have same characteristic of North.

The Navsarjan, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) exclusively fighting for water justice of Dalits provides evidence on the rampant water discrimination in North India. The kind of discrimination it discovered could be same across the North-West India. The Navsarjan believed that seeking justice for individual cases of discrimination would not address the problem of water injustice and chose to study the problem in some number of villages in Gujarat. In 1971, 23 villages it studied, it found 61% of the villages. According to this study, it was the Dalit who bear the burden of water related violence humiliation and abuse. Dalit women have to wait till the upper caste pour water into the pots of Dalit women and they shout at Dalit women asking keep distance. This understanding made the Navsarjan to keep Dalit women in the forefront of the water justice movement. In Dholka District Gujarat, The Dholka District Prevention of Water Oppression Committee was formed to lead the movement. In 1992, the Committee conducted a silent rally to the District Administrative Office (DAO) hold bottle of polluted and dirty water and offered the DAO to drink the water they brought and said to him that if he drinks the water in bottles, they would not ask for anything. In the memorandum submitted to the district administration, the committee demanded the district administration to be form a committee under the supervision of the district officers and involve women of village and volunteers of NGOs to form the water supply plan. It also demanded the women This was agree by the DAO's office. It also demanded that women be given the responsibility of operating wells, cleaning wells and spray medicine along with necessary funds. The Navsarjan's efforts and the work carried out by the Committee, the district administration convinces and visited the village to solve the problem. Thus, the Navsarjan built a model to fight water injustice. Such an organized movements with the support of such NGOs and activists would ensure water access to Dalits in south India too.

Even the higher educated also refuse to give up untouchability. Not long ago, a Dalit school teacher was given notice by the principal of the school for drinking water from the pot reserved for the upper caste teachers in the school. The incident took place in 2019 in Surendranagar District, Gujarat. According Kanhaiyalal Baraiya, Dalit teacher, the principal of the school allotted two pitchers-one for him and one for the upper caste teachers in the school which, by 'mistake' Baariya drank the water. The

discrimination in the school shocked the nation for three important reasons. First, it took place in school which is place for educating children on the social evils of the society, Second, discrimination is committed by no less than the principal of the school. Third, such a discrimination, perhaps, is existing throughout the Gujarat and in other state in different forms came into forefront because Dalit teacher violated the norm. if not for the upper caste Hindus in India, but it's existence in its pristine orthodox form into 21st century India, might not work well for India which is trying to present itself as world's largest democracy and as Viswaguru (teacher of the world).

South India is not progressive as Ambedkar believed. For instance, rural Tamil Nadu practices of untouchability and semi-urban areas practices somewhat sophisticated forms of untouchability. In justifying the deprivation of water of a well to Dalits in Kodikulam village in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, a caste Hindu (the village is consisting of Kallars and Moopers) said that they (caste Hindus) worship the well and the water from the well is used only for holy purposes and not for any other purposes. Further, he said they are clen when it come to the well and other people (Dalits) are not allowed to visit the well because they are not clean. A. Akkiniveeranam, 60 years old farmer of the same village who was living testimony for the social orthodoxy of the village say Dalits are not allowed go beyond a point towards the well and that the caste Hindu's would be kind enough to fetch the water from the well for Dalits but they would not be allowed to fetch the water from the well, a tradition that was in practice for ages. a young caste Hindu teenager says that young boys keep vigil and sleep near this temple to keep Dalits away. A caste Hindu widow believes there are bees which would sting Dalits if they go near to it. From 60 years old to a teenager, the caste Hindus of the village are having same opinions on the caste norms. The way they spoke, make it clear that they seriously adhere to caste system. The notoriety of the discrimination in the villager forced Dalits to fetch water from the neighboring Village Ottakadai.

Compare to wells, the modern water supply systems expected to, at least, reduce the degree of discrimination. The pipeline, the modern water-tank based supply could assist avoiding any non-Dalit and Dalit conflicts like that of the handpumps and wells. However, the caste Hindus very quickly gained control over this system too. In Karur, Tamil Nadu, Congress leader, Jyothimani Sennimalai, in her early career as a councilor succeeded in providing a sperate water connection for drinking water to Madharivalavu, a Dalit colony in Karur. Dalit colony of this village were facing water scarcity as the common well dried out and they had to migrate to the well located in the upper-caste dominated locality. This resulted in conflicts between these two communities. The minority status of the Dalits as a social agency would allow them to continue to fight. In course of time, they surrender to the pressure of the upper caste and loose the fight. In 1990s as a counselor, Jythemani promised to provide separate permanent water pipeline to the Dalit colony. She eventually secured one for Dalits despite the opposition from her family members and upper caste people of the village. This made her secure trust among Dalits. She eventually, write a book: *Neer Pirakkum Mun*, in which she stated that caste has its shadow even in drinking water. No matter how advances is the water supply system. Unfortunately, its management, supervision and operation (i.e., control) is always left with caste Hindus. Dalits getting such an opportunity would be a revolution thing. In Kayampatti village, Madurai, the existence of separate valve to supply water for Dalits from a overhead water tank, the caste Hindus having control over tank and volve, caste Hindus locking the volve earmarked for Dalits and depriving their due supply of water from the tank proves the fact, the caste system does not allow technology to break the caste barriers, instead it get inventive in evolving in means and mechanisms of domination and discrimination. While the volves which are earmarked for caste Hindus are not locked, the volve that earmarked for Dalits is locked. The caste Hindu operator claims the authority of rationing the water to Dalits. While the water there is continuous supply of water to Caste-Hindus, Dalits are supplied with water two hours in a day: one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. Two hours of supply for 90 families is hardly enough time for them all to collect water during the given time. Dalits are not even allowed to collect the water that was leaking at the volves. Inquiry launched into the matter by the district and block administration ended up supporting the caste Hindus and thus the administration justified the discrimination of caste Hindus.

2. Conclusion

Even during the time of natural calamities, the caste Hindus would strictly adhere to norms of caste. No matter even if a Dalit is dying out of thirsty without the sanction of the caste Hindus, if Dalits dare to take water on their own from a source of water that either located in the caste Hindu locality or under their control, consequences are very severe. In 2012, when Thane cyclone hit Tamil Nadu and Pudhucherry, apart from destruction it also exposed the caste tensions of Vanniyars and Dalits in Sathamangalam Village in Pudhucherry. While the cyclone destroyed the lives and livelihood of Dalits, the caste Hindu have not only denied the water, a live necessity but also brutally attacked men, women and children because Dalits dared to access the water on their own. Seventy families of the Sathamangalam Pet, Dalit colony went through the hell of violence brought upon them by the Vanniyars. On the new year even, 2012, hundred Vanniyar men entered into the colony, threw a five years old boy into paddy field, thrashed women with sticks and metal rods, dragged them by their hair and burnt bikes. Though police were present in scene, Dalits were left to defend themselves. The second day attack was much more brutal. They attacked property, damaged houses and even cooking utensils. The police from the Vanniyar caste filed counter cases against Dalits for trespassing into the water tank area. Paloor village in Cuddalore, the caste Hindu panchayat president denied water to the Dalit colony after the cyclone as the Dalits contested against the Vanniyar in Panchayat elections. Murugan, the Dalit female ward member's (Mahalakshimi) husband and Jayachandran, resident of the Dalit colony tied to tree and beaten for demanding the restoration of water and electricity supply. the police did not register the complaint given by Dalits, while the Vanniyar president welcomed cordially into the police station. police registered false cases against Murugan and Jayachandran for trespassing into Panchayat office and for breaking computers. Murugan was taken into custody and remanded for 14 days in police custody. Paloor Dalits had to wait for a month to get the water and electricity supply. Meantime, Dalits travelled three kms to fetch water by cycles from Aharam village. despite Human rights activists' pressure though case was filed against Saravan, Panchayat president, under the SC and ST Act, 1989, the police inspector Anbarasu who was also a Vanniyar was interested in providing reasons for arresting Murugan and Jayachandran instead of arresting Saravanan. This is always the caste with police. Most of the police are caste Hindus in Tamil Nadu. It easy for them to take side of the people belong to their caste.

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- Article 15 says that the state should not discriminate against any citizen on the ground only of religion, race, caste, sex and place of birth of any of them and the clause (2) and sub clause (b) say that it is the state responsibility to ensure the access to the use of wells, tanks, bath ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of state funds or dedicated to the use of general public.
- Ibid, p. 100.
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