



VEDA'S

JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (JOELL)

An International Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

Impact Factor (SJIF) 6.12

<http://www.joell.in>

Vol.10, No. 1

(January - March)

2023

RESEARCH ARTICLE



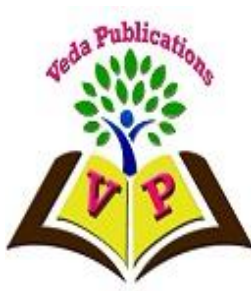
WATER CRISIS IN DALIT LITERATURE : FICTION AND REALITY

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<https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2023.10101>

ABSTRACT



Caste is a stigma in Indian society and has hampered its growth. Because of this, a section of society has perpetually dictated the lower castes. The upper caste has tormented Dalits economically and socially for primary needs such as water, an essential need for both humans and animals. The upper castes have forbidden the right to water to a lower caste. The upper classes felt that a touch of Dalit would contaminate the water. If a Dalit happened to trod into a pond, the Indian priest had to sanctify the defiled water with a yajna. This situation led to many heart-rending casualties.

This paper will investigate how the denial of even the fundamental right to water has rendered trouble in the lives of Dalits in India. Though the Dalit leaders had launched Satyagraha for Dalits to use a public tank in Maharashtra, the upper caste Hindus banned, the lower caste Hindus' access to water bodies.

The present study will shed light on water issues, specifically in Dalit literature by non-Dalit writers. Do upper caste Hindus still keep separate water bodies for themselves? To what degree have progressive writers displayed it in their writings?

Keywords: *Water, Dalit, Mahad Satyagraha, Dalit Fiction, Non-Dalit Writers.*

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INTRODUCTION

Dalits, also known as Untouchables, are the lowest caste in the Hindu caste system, meaning "oppressed" or "broken" (Szczepanski 2021). Water is vital for human survival. In India, the untouchables have been denied not only respect but also access to water. Its origins can be traced back to the Manusmriti, which split humans into four Varnas: Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. The last Varna was deprived of all its privileges and disallowed to partake in human society. Even their shadows were considered a terrible omen. They were denied access to water since they were not permitted to touch anything. They would spoil the water if they touched it. If a Dalit accidentally touched it, he was penalised. In Indian literature, there are countless examples of this. Amita Baviskar observes that 'struggles over water are simultaneously struggles for power over symbolic representations and material resources'. (2007)

WATER CHALLENGES IN DALIT FICTION

This study will primarily focus on Thakazhi Sivasankara's 'Scavenger's Son', Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable' and Shanta Rameshwar Rao's 'Children of God'. Thakazhi Sivasankara has depicted water-related issues in his novel 'Scavenger's Son'. The novel portrays how even water scantiness can cause a Dalit's death. Water scarcity has long been a central concern in Dalit fiction. They were not permitted to touch anything. They were unable to access water because of this. They received harsher treatment than the animals. Ishukkumuttu is thirsty and in desperate need of water in 'Scavenger's Son'.

In the morning, he asks his son to fetch water for him. "My boy, there's a pot in the corner. Take that too. Only if you bring a little water shall I have anything to drink. Have you drunk anything?" (Sivasankara 3) On the first day of his new employment, his son Chualamuttu was preoccupied with the new job that he neglected to bring water for him. Ishukkumuttu died because of this.

The father and son's dialogue suggests that they wake up without water. As a result, Ishukkumuttu inquires about his son and if he has drunk anything. Water, let alone food, is a long way away for them. Outside employment and domestic obligations were inextricably linked for the untouchable. They had to provide water at home while at work, especially if someone in the family was ailing. Therefore, Ishukkumuttu pleaded with his son to carry the pot again.

The high-caste Hindus only remember the faces of the untouchables when the latrines are overflowing. They do not even recognise them otherwise. Chudalamuttu had spent his childhood eating kanji and rice. Although kanji is a drink, they eat it because they cannot afford food. They have to scavenge food from the trash. As a result, their eating comprises drinking. They will not be able to obtain it in time if they fail to handle water properly.

Mulk Raj Anand has delineated this theme in his novel 'Untouchable'. The untouchables are usually helpless and unable to access water when required. They must wait in long queues to receive it. They sometimes have to wait for several hours. They cannot touch the village pump because it will be contaminated. As a result, they must rely on the caste system to obtain it. These untouchables must



work without a water supply. Sometimes they get water; sometimes, they stink, so no one goes near them to keep themselves clean.

The Dalits never got water on time. They had to work hard the whole day picking the latrine. Regardless, they were unable to procure drinking water. In *Untouchable*, Bakha was fatigued from the day's work. However, he was unable to obtain water. This illness causes them mental trauma, which they must suffer and learn to live with time. His long day's work had not even provided him with a tumbler of water.

The untouchables needed to have thousands of rupees to invest in a new well. On the other hand, the wealthy had water carriers who could bring them water. As a result, the untouchables were forced to rely on the kindness of a kind-hearted high-caste man. The waiting time was prayer time. They even cursed themselves for their bad luck. In *Untouchable*, the sepoy ignored the untouchables' needs and went about his job. He did not even feel sorry for the thirsty individuals and their families.

Fortunately, Pandit Kali Nath came to their aid, but he merely wanted to share water because it would help him with his chronic constipation. He also picked the proper victim to molest or rape if she yielded. As a result, the water came at the cost of her humiliation. The priest was so enamoured of Sohini's beauty that he offered her water. The other women were still without water. They could only acquire water when a third man, Lachman, a water carrier, arrived and offered it to them.

Bakha recalls his mother's hot beverage. His mother used to offer him a blend of tea leaves, milk,

and water when she was alive. He only remembers this fantastic food or drink. It gave him enough energy to last the entire day. In *'Choma's Drum'*, Belli served her family of six members with rice gruel.

Soma defies tradition by touching the water in front of the entire community in *'Children of God'*, she is concerned when the higher-caste women forbid her and her community from fetching water. If a caste woman shows compassion for the untouchables, another caste woman chastises her and tells her to give them only her part. There is a commotion as though the entire world has turned upside down when Soma comes into contact with the pool's water, the water is contaminated. As a result, a priest can only cleanse it. Therefore, they decide to purify it at the expense of Dalits.

"Rama!" the caste women would exclaim. "Must you eternally beg? Now it is money you ask, now clothes, now food! And now you come crying for water. It is the hot season, and the well would run dry with so many drawing from it. How much can we give, eh, how much? There is no end at all to your begging, it seems! You try to swallow the hand if you are given the finger!" (Rao 97).

When the untouchable women went to fetch water, they were considered beggars, not even human beings. Some caste women pitied them and let them get water. When the untouchables' water holes dried up, they went to the caste women for help, who said their well was also not full of rainwater. According to the temple cook's wife, the untouchables are too responsible for their destiny, and Kali Yuga and god are not pleased with them, she says.



"If you ask why then I will tell you. It is because it is an age of sin, Kali Yuga, when castes mix and cause confusion and chaos. There's a drought, which the gods have sent in anger" (Rao 98).

When defiant Soma ventured to take water herself, there was a huge uproar. "Rama! Oh, Rama, Rama!" the women screeched. "She touched the well. Polluted, polluted. For shame! Help." (Rao 99). The touch of an untouchable could pollute the water, and they were about to dismember her. The caste people blamed the untouchables instead of giving water to them. Thus, they exploit them. The junior priest also fines them for purification. During the terrible period of no rain, brawls, clashes, and heated arguments were expected.

In 'Samskara', Naranappa catches the fish and eats it away directly, thus violating Hindu laws and polluting the water. He is a Brahman who engages in such conduct. Water is a conduit via which the so-called upper castes keep Dalits isolated and powerless. They are separated from the primary concern by the science of defilement, and they continue to think of themselves as low. It is another weapon the upper caste employs against the other castes in order to demonstrate and exploit their supremacy.

According to Dr Ambedkar, two essential agencies through which the upper caste keep the untouchables entangled are women and caste. Anyone who attempts to subvert the hegemony is tossed out. Naranappa was labelled an outcaste for breaking the tradition. This horror binds everyone in their respective castes. In 'Castes in India', Ambedkar says, "Castes have no mercy for a

sinner who dares to violate the code. The penalty is ex-communication, and the result is a new caste."

MAHAD SATYAGRAHA

This chapter began with Mr C.K. Bole's pivotal proposal in the Bombay Legislative Council, which the Bombay Government adopted in 1923. The Mahad city council decided that all public spaces should be accessible to the untouchables. Due to high caste hate, the untouchables were never allowed to exercise their rights. (Samuel 724) The upper caste refused to acknowledge the city ordinances and forbade the untouchable from touching the water. They had taken away the right to even drink water from the oppressed. Until the Mahad Satyagrah, the Bole Resolution functioned only in black and white.

Mahad Satyagraha is a watershed moment in Dalit history. On 20 March 1927, Dr Ambedkar, with 4000 untouchables, drank water to demonstrate that individuals like them were also human beings. The town's upper caste residents witnessed the incident and were swept away by the tempest. They were standing there, observing a never-before-seen sight. They appeared shocked and immobile at the time.

There was caste in the water. The castes were split into the well, pool, and ponds. The untouchables were allowed to die, but they could not consume a drop of water. Buffaloes, cows, dogs and cats were permitted to drink from the well, but not the untouchables, who needed the legal right to do so.

Upper Caste Hindus also performed a purifying ceremony to erase the defilement



undertaken by Dalits for simply drinking from a public tank. They loaded 108 earthen pots with curd, cow excrement, cow milk, and cow urine and poured them into the pond. As a result, the water was pronounced clean and ready to use by them.

After hearing a rumour that these people were planning to enter into Veereshwar Temple, the upper caste assailed the untouchables with lathis. Males and women, as well as children, were beaten. They were willing to drink cow urine, but they could not drink water that the untouchables had touched.

Dr Ambedkar had planned to have a second conference on the 26th and 27th of December 1927, but the caste Hindu had filed a complaint against him, so he had to abandon the idea. On 17th December 1936, the untouchables could finally drink water from Chavdar well after a ten-year wait. Simultaneously, other freedom movements were underway, with the focus being freedom, but here it was only the right to drink water.

In *Akkarmashi*, Sharan the narrator, a Mahar caste, is chastised for giving water to Arjya, a Mang boy whose caste was lower than him. He ruminates on the meaning of dehumanising caste laws. He was disappointed because he couldn't provide water to a friend. Is a person's caste more valuable than a friend's? Is it feasible that caste is more significant than thirst? Wasn't Arjya a human? How did he make water impure by simply touching it?

PRESENT SCENARIO

According to *The Wire*, On July 2, 2021, A Dalit family in Jammu and Kashmir's Udhampur area was attacked while trying to get water from a public

well. The upper caste had assaulted the family members and called Dalits names.

According to the Times of India, on May 31, 2020, some caste people in Alwar's Khera village in Bharatpur district refused to let Dalits use hand pumps and the RO water plant. They even attacked others who refused to obey. According to India Today, On July 3, 2019, the water in the water bodies in Uttar Pradesh's Bundelkhand had dried up. Dalits were unable to obtain water and had to trek seven to eight kilometres from a Dalit region. The lathi-wielding men guard the caste people's hand pumps. They considered this water only belonged to them.

According to Hindustan Times, On Sep 10, 2019, The Dalits of Madurai, Tamil Nadu, said they did not have enough water. According to Janadeep Preethi, a Dalit woman from Kayampatti, there are three valves, with the Dalit valve being the only one with locks. As a result, they are unable to carry water throughout the day. Meenakshi, a 45-year-old Dalit lady, claims that the Tahsildar has not responded to their repeated pleas.

For breakfast, the untouchables commonly drank rice gruel, tea, and kanji, which used to work all day. Though it had certain food substances, how could it be sufficient to last the entire day? Sanitation, bathing, and cleaning would not be possible without water.

CONCLUSION

Some Indians' psyche is still paralysed. They are mentally impaired and have not got full development. It is the reason that has led to many atrocities occurring only for the sake of water. Even animals can obtain water whenever they wish, but a



section of Indian society is still lagging behind and cannot have the access to water.

Mulk Raj Anand hits the caste cycle by presenting untouchables, who have to fetch water and wait for long hours for the mercy of an upper caste. In *Children of God*, Rao describes the brawls that usually take place. In *Scavenger's Son*, Thakazhi Sivasankara portrays how caste can be disastrous for human life. The situation remains pitiful in several Indian states, where Dalits are still abused for touching or collecting water in 2022 India.

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