



WATER AS A SITE OF DISCRIMINATION FOR DALIT WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Water is essential for all forms of life and crucial for human development. Water is essential for all forms of life and crucial for human development. Though it is treated as common natural resource, countries like India accessing water is still a social problem for dalits because water is connected with caste. Dalits were also known as untouchables, harijans, chandala, exterior caste and depressed class. The notion of purity and pollution in water sector is one of the sectors mainly practicing untouchability. Based on Focused Group Discussions conducted and interviews with five dalit women in a hamlet named Ottampatty Pudhur of Sikkathampur Panchayat in Tiruchirappalli district the paper highlights the issues of dalit women. Also this study focuses on the intersection of gender, caste and discrimination in accessing water resources also the paper tries to explain the forms of discrimination by caste Hindu women in general and dalit women in particular.

KEY WORD: Dalit, Women, Water, Discrimination, Gender.

INTRODUCTION

Water is essential for all forms of life and crucial for human development. Though it is treated as common natural resource, countries like India accessing water is still a social problem for dalits because water is connected with caste. Caste determines every aspects of Indian life across class, religion and gender. Dalits or Scheduled Caste women are facing the multiple discrimination, humiliation and oppression of their inferior status in the caste hierarchy if we pronounce in general; while accessing village natural resources, common property resources and public infrastructures in particular. Moreover as concerning water resources like public wells, ponds, stand pipes, hand pumps are located mainly in center of the village which is the prime living locality of dominant caste. The caste hierarchy fixed the dominant castes at centre of the village whereas dalits at margins of the village. In religio-cultural order of society water is considered as symbol of purity and prosperity meanwhile Hindu culture is treating dalits are impure, this made dalits especially dalit women to prevent access water resource mainly drinking water. Irrespective of caste, domestic water collection is assigned as primary role of women; in this task dalit women are more vulnerable than other caste women. Due to the notion of purity-pollution in drinking water sector is one of the critical domains which are practicing untouchability and discrimination severely. During the process in water collection sites dalit women are facing multiple forms of discriminations and humiliations in the name of their caste, sex identity by both upper caste men and women though there citizenship rights are guaranteed constitutionally. With this background this paper explores the forms of discrimination faced by dalit women in water collection sites and its impacts of rural areas in the name of caste identity with the support of empirical evidences.



METHODOLOGY

The field work has conducted in Ottampatty pudhur village of Sikkathambur panchayat in Thuraiyur block of Tiruchirappalli district of Tamil Nadu. The blocks have taken for this study is a drought prone area. Interviews and Focused Group Discussions (FDGs) were adopted to collect data from Scheduled caste women. This study focuses on the intersection of gender, caste and discrimination in accessing water resources also the paper tries to explain the forms of discrimination by caste Hindu women in general and dalit women in particular.

WATER, DALITS AND DISCRIMINATION

Dalits have discriminated in living dignified life and accessing public resources always been a problem. Dalits have forced to live in the outskirts of every village and ostracized by majority of the inhabitants who are living in centre. The structures of primary resources which are fulfilling the needs of the village i.e., schools, ration shop, anganwadi, panchayat office, bus stops, water tank, temples, toilets, and primary health centers are located in centre of main village. The typology of village studied by the researcher is also not excluded from these hierarchal settings. In The entrenched social hierarchy that based on Hindu religious order water has been regarded as the symbol of purity. In addition to that such inhuman values have seclude them polluted and made them pollutants as well the water bodies get polluted when accessing water. Drinking water sector is one of the prone areas for discrimination than the irrigation sector in accessing water resources where dalits faced more discrimination.

Dalits are generally prevented by the Caste Hindus when accessing village's water resources since such resources are geographically located in the Caste Hindu's vicinities as well those are controlled by them till today. Moreover As the living places of dalits have entirely been separated from the main area of the village dalits could not access water resources. During the time of water collection dalit women are discriminated or humiliated rigorously than dalit men as women have always directly connected with the responsibilities of water collection, conservation and distribution.

DALIT WOMEN AND DRINKING WATER ACCESS

The violence and oppression against them has been more complex and manifold even compared to dalit men, thus dalit women are often described as the oppressed of the oppressed. There is an inseparable relationship between caste status in the hierarchy and occupation. The Dalit woman faced triple discrimination as an untouchable, of a poor class and a woman (Human Rights Watch, 2007). In the patriarchal society normally female members of the family undertake the task of collecting and managing water for domestic use. In villages water resources are segregated by caste, its mean that dalits are forbidden from using the water sources used by dominant caste. These caste based discriminations vehemently denied to exercise their fundamental livelihood rights and served to divide them. The following cases are reflected such inhuman value system.

A young dalit woman Usha (26) shared her experience of discrimination while fetching water 'When I came to this village after .y neighbor who is also a dalit woman happened to back off the dominant caste woman's overflowed plastic pot while collecting water from the public tap, was verbally abused as 'Sakkilichi ne thottatha na polanganuma' (Should I use the thing after touched by the filthy dalit?) and the dominant caste woman throw away the water that she collected This was my first experience of caste discrimination and was shocked by the woman's behavior and this incidence disturbed me a lot.

Apart from such inhuman behavior of the caste Hindus, dalit women are humiliated in other forms like unpleasant signs, languages and posture this reflects evidently their hegemonic caste mentality that rooted in the religious belief. When I had fight with the dominant caste women for the discriminatory practices they have reacted with much anger and scolded me by using our caste name 'Sakkilichilam pesura' (Even a dalit talk like this) and by other filthy words. I have ever seen this kind of caste discrimination in my native village as we have separate water tapes and hand pumps (Public water source). But here situation is entirely different. We, as the villagers, are depending on the public tap for drinking water. Dominant caste

women's approach and their behavior hurt me lot. But we are unable to rise against the injustice and ensure our constitutional rights instead we simply tolerate all forms of humiliations as we do not have any other sources for our drinking water. In addition to that, if we think to migrate from here that is impossible as our basic livelihood sources of land, house and cattle are here. I felt many times, why I got married to this village; if I married somewhere I could escape from these problems... everything is my fate... Finally she concludes that, 'If we have a permanent separate source, we would not go to their place like wise they would not come here, through this we can maintain our self respect and could live with dignified manner'.

According to the views of the respondent, usha, constructing separate water structures could not solve caste discrimination in water collection points but it may be reduced the level of caste discrimination at some extent. This kind of exclusive water bodies for dalits, promoted by government itself is a modern form of untouchability. Such segregated water structures created by the state indirectly maintains the existing social order of the caste hierarchy.

Another respondent Rukku (47) explains 'Caste discrimination is inevitable event in our daily life, I faced the discrimination many times in my life with different forms i.e while fetching water in public tap, when enters to the temple, at work places, when sharing the same seat in the bus and so on. However the situations have comparatively reduced now. At the time of water scarcity due to the low level of ground water especially in summer we have to take water from Over Head Tanks (OHTs) which is situated in the centre of the village. During this situation we faced various forms of discrimination such as cleaning the taps after we used, keep distancing from us and keep the pots away from us. Likewise we also keep some distance to avoid unnecessary problems. When we are failing to keep distance, immediately they start to scold us, but I would not encourage such practice anyway. Immediately I will react, she assertively speaks. 'Even though, I born in a lower caste I maintain cleanliness when compared to dominant caste women. But their discriminatory approaches and practices wounded me many times, we cannot escape from this practice unless we have permanent separate water system or else leaving from here' she says.

According to Rakesh (2007) proliferation of own source at household level or larger number of water sources at the village level will decline the chances of caste discrimination. The suggestion to make separate water sources in dalit villages may reduce the discrimination at certain level if not in the holistic manner as the discriminatory attitude still exists in all the super structures of the society.

A daily wager woman named Chinnu (45) shared her experience historically, 'Two decades ago we had to wait to collect water until dominant caste women collect. In earlier days we were not allowed to take water directly from the public well. They only allow us after the dominant caste women completed their task and they use to pour it into our pots without touching us consciously. Sometimes they refused to do this task and they will simply say they have so many works at home so they refuse to do so. In such situations we had to wait for others to pour water in our pots. I heard such incidents from my childhood. We cannot directly access the public well, even we should not stand in nearby the well and we have to sit or stand outside the compound of the well. I thought many times, why these people are keeping me (us) in a distance?. Initially i do not know the reason for this discrimination, when I grown up I understood that caste is the root cause for all these problems. But when we compared to those days, caste discrimination in water points has declined. At present we collect water from the same pipes where dominant caste collects water, we can directly access public taps without any restrictions, we have equal rights of what they have. However we still have a fear in minds whether they would have called me by caste name when quarrel take place. When the main water source fails particularly in summer, the Panchayat authority make arrangements to collect water from the common taps (8 to 10 temporary pipes), which directly connected from Over Head Tanks (OHTs). Even though we are allowed to use the public source of drinking water, they asked to collect from separate pipes (exclusively 2 to 3 pipes out of 10 for dalits usage) such approaches makes me disappointed (Chinnu, 45). Though this exclusion hurts me sometimes, purposively I avoid reacting as we have to go to their land for work. I know there are laws for our protection but what can we do? Due to our inability and dependency we adjust everything'.

Her situation is comparatively better now than earlier and in her perspective direct access from public sources without the dominant caste's supports itself a great achievement in her life but anyhow still the fear has exists in her mind. The socio-economic conditions of dalits made them dependent to dominant caste that leads to tolerate and compromise their self respect at every level. Dominant castes practice two ways of protecting their water sources. First, they would not allow untouchables to touch their water sources. They would draw water and pour it into the pots of the untouchables, which would be kept away from the water source. Another way is, arranging separate queue for dalits (Rakesh Tiwary, 2007). In present scenario, the dominant castes allow dalits to accessing public water resources with 'certain conditions' (collects from separate pipes, keeping distance, cleaning tap) hence the unequal access in water still exists.

A College going dalit girl named Hema (18), shared her experience with tears, 'I am not interested in doing water collection work because of caste discrimination practiced by dominant caste women in water collection sites. Most of the time I go for water collection with my mother. Usually we prefer the time for water collection when there is no one at the public tap. When dominant caste women came, they prefer to collect water first, they would keep distance and also keeps their pots with considerable distance, and even they keep their cloths away, with certain distance, to avoid touching our body even unknowingly. Their approach and behavior towards us (dalits) hurts me a lot. Many times felt I am insulted when I faced such situation but I never share this pain to anyone. Due to this reason I will do all household chores except water collection but my mother force me to collect water'. In this case her mother's generations were more vulnerable to the caste discrimination due to the ignorance of their civil rights and lacks of organised form of political mobilisation. But hema's generation not taking this humiliation as normal and them aware of these kind of insults. Also the education creates some positive changes in the minds of younger generations. They are not tolerating such discriminations imposed by the dominant castes as earlier days. Now they are raising questions against the caste hierarchy and caste based inequalities prevailing in society.

Rita (29) a daily waged dalit woman shared bitter experience encountered by her during the time of water collection. 'Recently installed hand pump by the village panchayat in dalits locality has good quality and good taste for both drinking and cooking purposes. Hence the dominant caste women also started to fetch water from the same hand pump. She narrated one of the discrimination she faced recently, 'I took water and moved away few meters distance from the hand pump, a school girl studying 7th std from the dominant caste came to fetch water. I noticed that she immediately washed the hands and mouth of the pump. She also cleaned the place where my pot was located in order to make the place pure. I was shocked by the behavior of a small girl and attitude towards dalits.

In this village it is very common among both aged and middle age women are following these discriminatory practices when collecting water. But the behavior of younger generation disturbed me a lot and raised many questions in my mind. I simply observed her act, and silently crossed over. She stated that accessing water is always a problem for us whether its public well or public taps; anywhere we face the same kind of discriminations. During the time of water scarcity i.e summer season if we go to their place we can get more water, but we avoid (though we have insufficient water in our area) to escape from the mistreatment of dominant caste at the water collection sites. We know that their treatment is unfriendly, unfair, inhumane and hurting but there is no other way to get water. So we tolerate any extreme behavior of dominant caste women'. The behavior of school going younger is not the fault of her. She has reflected the transmission of casteist ideology deep rooted in the society through socialisation though school texts teaches 'untouchability is a sin, crime and inhumane'.

CONCLUSION

Dalit women are occupying the bottom of both caste and gender hierarchies, this vulnerable position force them to accept the discrimination rather resist. The relationship between women and water is natural as well as intertwine whereas dalit women's relationship with water is very intricate. When a dalit woman takes water from the common water resources, upper caste women are practicing untouchability and also they think that dalit women's presence or the touch makes the water pollute and unfit for consumption (Joshi, Fawcett, 2006 & Ragupathi 2010). The practices of caste based discrimination in public places are continuing though untouchability is illegal. Particularly in water sites dalit women encounter caste discriminations. They are subjected to various forms of discriminations and hardships while fetching water by the dominant caste in the name of purity such as cleaning the source after use, insist to take water from separate pipes, keeping distance from the person and pot and humiliating through verbal and non-verbal acts etc., While comparing the past situation caste based discrimination in drinking water sites may be reduced at some extend but the minute forms of discriminations are existing according to the context of modern society, it has been proven by many studies (Nirupam Hazra 2014 & Throat 2002). Deeply entrenched caste system plays a crucial role in dividing dalits as impure and this caste mentality keeps them faraway from water resources. Though modern technology has improved socially unwritten rules denied the rights of accessing common water resources of dalits. Under patriarchal caste based Indian society, water is connected with not just with purity also openly connected with power and hierarchy. In this socially stratified caste system along with gendered norms operates its power to suppress the rights and voices of dalit women when they questioned the denial of their livelihood rights particularly water rights. Beyond that the younger generations are questioning against the discriminatory practices and resist the multiple forms of discriminations and caste based hegemonic structure through their untiring struggles irrespective of age. Their struggles would continue till they reach equality.

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