

# Thirsting for Equality: Caste Barriers and Water Rights

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## ABSTRACT

*Water is a globally ubiquitous resource that belongs to all members of society, regardless of any form of discrimination. Caste discrimination has been practiced throughout India's history, resulting in the marginalization of certain individuals due to their lower caste status. According to Hindu sacred texts, water has traditionally been regarded as an element symbolizing purity. Consequently, individuals from upper castes have imposed water segregation based on the belief that contact with lower caste individuals would render the water impure. This paper will examine the severe discrimination manifested in the denial of water access to marginalized individuals belonging to lower castes. Through an analysis of Bama's Karakku and Om Prakash Valmiki's Jhoothan this paper will elucidate how water, a resource that should be equally accessible to all, has been historically denied to certain subaltern sections of society. This study will also demonstrate the significance of sustainable development goals in India for addressing issues related to water scarcity.*

**Keywords:** *Caste, Water Allocation, Inequality, Marginalization, and SDGs*

## 1. Introduction

The caste system practiced in India is predicated on the structure of the Varna system or Chaturvarna, wherein Brahmins (priests) occupy the highest position, Kshatriyas (soldiers) are accorded the second position, Vaishyas (traders) are assigned the third position, and the Shudras (servants) are relegated to the last and final position. The Shudras have consistently been regarded as societal outcasts, deprived of fundamental human rights. The presence, physical contact, and even the shadow of these individuals are perceived as contaminants by members of higher castes. Certain castes, such as the Mahars to which B R Ambedkar belonged, were compelled to affix brooms to their waists to erase their footprints. In Hinduism, it is posited that individuals who had committed transgressions in their previous lives were reincarnated into lower caste categories in their present existence. As Brahmins occupied the highest echelon of the social hierarchy, they proceeded to codify laws that favored their own interests, granting themselves privileges across various domains while simultaneously diminishing the rights of individuals belonging to lower castes. Louis Althusser's concept of Ideology can be applied in this context, as Althusser postulated that the dominant societal stratum has consistently attempted to manipulate the populace through false consciousness, inducing them to accept certain notions as valid without critical examination. The upper-caste population employed a similar strategy by propagating an ideology of birth-based supremacy among the masses, compelling the subaltern lower-caste individuals to accept their circumstances as immutable and historically predetermined, thereby precluding any questioning of the restrictions and impositions forced upon them. The caste system is deeply entrenched in Indian history, and the normalization of cruelty and violence against lower-caste individuals has persisted across generations. The persistent implementation of caste systems has created a socioeconomic divide between higher and lower castes based on wealth disparity. Higher caste individuals, with access to all amenities, occupy a more privileged position in society, while lower caste individuals are marginalized and lack access to even basic necessities such as potable water. In a nation of 1.2 billion, more than 800 million people earn less than Rs 20. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the father of the nation, vehemently opposed the concept of the caste system, asserting that all individuals were equal and entitled to basic human rights. Gandhi referred to the outcaste people as Harijans, signifying that

they were children of God. In rural areas, lower caste individuals face social ostracism if they transgress against higher caste individuals. These marginalized individuals are denied food and water, and are left to suffer without any consideration for their basic human needs. Extreme violence was played against the lower caste people where they were forced to drink urine and were physically and verbally abused. Individuals of lower caste status were assigned menial tasks, such as manually removing human waste produced by upper caste members, demonstrating the inhumane treatment to which these individuals were subjected. In rural areas, spatial segregation was implemented between the residences of high and low caste individuals; they were prohibited from sharing meals, accessing the same water sources, and inter-caste marriages were considered a transgression. Severe acts of violence were perpetrated against lower caste individuals, including forced consumption of urine and subjection to physical and verbal abuse. In contemporary India, despite the legal prohibition of caste discrimination, the practice persists and remains prevalent in present society. Individuals from lower castes continue to experience severe verbal and physical abuse, including fatal assaults. In Kerala, a member of the tribal community was fatally beaten by upper-caste individuals for the alleged theft of a small quantity of rice. On September 22, 1992, a lower caste woman named Bhanwari was subjected to gang rape by members of the Gujjar family in the presence of her husband, as retribution for opposing child marriage. This incident illustrates the lack of voice and agency afforded to women of lower castes in both public and private spheres. The Hathras case of 2020 further exemplifies this issue, wherein a 19-year-old girl from a lower caste was brutally raped by four men of higher caste status, and subsequently, her body was cremated by law enforcement without familial consent.

In the novella *Samskara* by U R Ananthamurthy, a significant manifestation of caste discrimination and violence is evident. The text illustrates how Brahmins resided in agraharas, which were segregated from the dwellings of lower caste individuals. Naranappa, despite being a Brahmin, was denied a proper funeral after his death due to his marriage to Chandri, who belonged to a lower caste. The self-proclaimed pure Brahmins in the narrative are depicted as objectifying Chandri, an act that is neither considered morally reprehensible nor impure within their social context. Chandri is prohibited from entering the agrahara premises. Subsequently, Praneshacharya, who is ascribed the status of being the highest priest, engaged in a sexual act with Chandri, thereby exemplifying the hypocrisy inherent in caste discrimination. This incident underscores the paradoxical nature of the caste system, wherein lower caste individuals are marginalized and deemed repulsive by higher caste members, while simultaneously, the sexual objectification and assault of these women is not considered a transgression.

## 2. Objectives

- To examine the historical practice of caste discrimination in India, rooted in the concepts of karma and the Varna system.
- To investigate the persistence of caste-based discrimination and the denial of fundamental human rights, such as access to water, in the contemporary 21st century context.
- To analyze, through the literary works *Karakku* and *Jhoothan*, how Bama and Om Prakash Valmiki exemplify the severe treatment resulting from caste discrimination.

## 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach utilizing textual analysis of *Karakku* and *Jhoothan*. The concepts of False Consciousness, Hegemony, and Marginalization will be applied to examine the inhumane treatment of untouchables by the higher caste.

## 4. Ripples of Discrimination: The Water Divide

Bama, in her seminal work *Karukku*, discusses the segregation of settlements present in her society, which included a division between the lower castes such as Odapatti, Nadars, Koravar, and Chakkiliyar, and the upper class, referred to as the Naicker streets. The Naicker streets possessed various facilities, including post offices, churches, and schools, which were exclusively accessible to upper-caste individuals. Naickers were considered the highest caste in her society, and even physical contact with a lower-caste person was believed to pollute them. Bama's grandmothers were employed as servants in the houses and fields of Naickers, and they were

offered leftover food by the Naicker women. This food was accepted by Bama's grandmothers as if it were an offering from a deity, illustrating how false consciousness based on caste operates, as lower-caste individuals have been erroneously taught that high-caste people are favored by the divine, rather than themselves. There is lack of availability of water in the segregated region where Bama used to live as they has to travel long distances to collect water. This shows how the untouchables are thrown into the periphery with lack of access to water. Segregation based on caste is also evident in the context of water-sharing. The segregation of settlements also implies that different wells as water sources, which are considered to be symbols of purity, will become impure according to the conservative notions of the high-caste individuals. In a related incident, Bama's Patti was working under the scorching heat in the field of Naickers and subsequently requested water from them. They proceeded to pour water from a height of four feet, and her Patti had to drink water with cupped hands. This incident is deeply concerning, as it demonstrates that water, a life-sustaining element, is not provided in a dignified manner to other human beings. There are instances where Dalits, particularly women and children, were subjected to humiliation and abuse when attempting to access water from public taps or wells designated for upper-caste individuals. The act of accessing water became a site of contention for asserting basic human rights. There was a lack of water availability in the segregated region where Bama resided, as they were required to travel long distances to collect water. This illustrates how untouchables are marginalized with limited access to water resources. In a documented incident in Kodikulam, a village located under Yanamalai, extreme caste discrimination among the untouchables is evident, as there is a public well that provides clear water, but access to that water is only granted to the higher caste individuals while the lower caste individuals are denied water from that well. Higher-caste individuals have deliberately placed a honeycomb near the well, so that unfamiliar persons who approach will be stung by numerous bees, which demonstrates an extreme form of violence and inhumane activity against certain subaltern groups in society.

#### **4.1 Parched by Prejudice: The intersection of Caste Discrimination and Water Denial**

*Jhoothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki is considered to be the first text in Hindi that identifies itself as part of Dalit literature. Historically, Dalits have been positioned at the lowest level of social hierarchies, denied even the most fundamental human rights, such as access to potable water from public sources. The word "jhoothan" carries connotations of ritual purity and pollution, as "jootha" signifies contamination. The title itself encapsulates the suffering that the Dalits have endured over generations. If a Dalit experienced thirst, they were required to wait near the hand pump to quench it. Valmiki, in addition to his academic pursuits, was assigned the task of sweeping floors, unlike his upper-caste counterparts who were permitted to focus solely on their studies. Moreover, he was prohibited from drinking water when thirsty, which exemplified how even the most basic and essential needs were systematically denied to children based on arbitrary caste discrimination. These children were not permitted to drink water from cups during examinations; instead, they were provided water from an elevated position, necessitating them to cup their hands to satisfy their thirst. The residential area inhabited by Valmiki's community was characterized by a segregated water source, distinct from that utilized by higher caste individuals. During periods of precipitation, their wells were contaminated with parasitic organisms, leaving the residents with no alternative but to consume the tainted water. This situation exemplifies how marginalized populations are not only denied access to water resources but also lack the means to obtain potable water. In a separate incident, Valmiki, experiencing severe thirst after standing for an extended duration, requested water from a drummer. However, the only response provided to the child was that he could consume water upon returning to his residence. Upon returning home, he consumed a substantial quantity of water. These instances underscore how a life-sustaining element, such as water, is withheld, potentially endangering life. These individuals labor throughout the day without access to water, illustrating the societal inequities. The Dalits, including Valmiki's family, frequently relied on rainwater collected from small ponds, which was often contaminated and insufficient. This deprivation served as a persistent reminder of their low social status and the rigid caste hierarchies that governed every aspect of their lives. In a documented incident, a nine-year-old child drowned inside a well when attempting to drink water after being denied access at school. Caste discrimination has become so severe that even young children are losing their lives due to such practices. Caste discrimination is prevalent in the Bundelkhand region, which also experiences severe drought periodically, exacerbating the difficulties faced by marginalized people in obtaining water. In another incident, a Dalit boy was fatally beaten by his teacher for touching a water pot in the Surana village of Rajasthan. These distressing occurrences demonstrate how the practice of rigid caste discrimination is prioritized over human life. Caste discrimination has reached a critical point where mere contact with water can provoke severe reactions.

The graphic biography titled "Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability" by Subash Vyam, S. Anand, Durga Bai Vyam, and Srividya Natarajan illustrates how B.R Ambedkar was denied access to water in school. B.R Ambedkar subsequently initiated the Mahad Satyagraha to challenge the monopoly of the upper caste, consequently leading to the establishment of access to water as a fundamental right.

Sustainable Development Goals have been implemented in India to effect positive change in environmental conservation. One of the SDGs stipulates that by 2030, the objective is to ensure universal access to safe and affordable drinking water. This particular goal aims to address one of the numerous challenges faced by populations regarding water scarcity.

## 5. Conclusion

India has perpetuated the unjust practice of caste discrimination and untouchability for centuries, resulting in the loss of numerous innocent lives. This discrimination has created a significant disparity between high- and low-caste individuals in various aspects of society. Access to water is a fundamental human right, as water is a global common resource that does not belong to any individual on Earth. However, untouchability has been extended to the domain of water access and denial, where individuals from lower castes are compelled to plead with those of higher castes to satisfy their basic need for hydration. This has led to a double marginalization of lower caste individuals, who were already marginalized due to their caste status and are now further marginalized through the denial of natural resources such as water. In the 21st century, while it is commonly believed that caste systems have been abolished and are no longer practiced, this is a misconception as discrimination against lower caste individuals persists even in modern, educated societies. The government should implement effective measures to ensure equal access to water in all regions of the country, not solely in areas inhabited by high caste and influential individuals. The abolition of untouchability should not be imposed externally; rather, individuals should independently recognize the importance of fostering an inclusive society to establish an egalitarian social structure.

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