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## **Dalit Women and Water: Availability, Access and Discrimination in South Asian Context**

*Keerthika Suntharalingam*

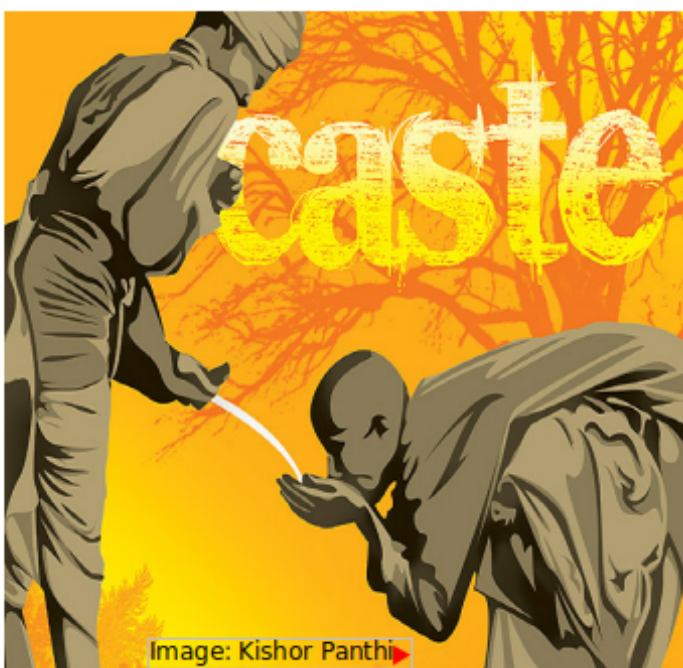
### **Abstract**

Water is a deeply contentious issue, intersecting in many ways with identities of caste and gender status in South Asian countries, creating complex cultural meanings and social hierarchies. In that way the word Dalit means "suppressed" or "broken" and represents exploited groups traditionally associated with women in South Asian countries such as India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. The present study aims to identify how access to water use, availability and related experiences is shaped by their caste and gender identity hierarchy. Based on qualitative research methodology, this study has been carried out using primary and secondary data collection methods. Dalit women based case study and direct observation techniques have been used as primary data collection tools. 20 case studies have been taken from two different parts of Jaffna namely Alaveddy and Gurunagar. A variety of rich scholarly literature has been reviewed and analyzed as secondary data collection tools. The findings of the study found that water has been a traditional medium of marginalization of Dalits in overt and subtle ways. Dalits have been found to be denied rights and access to water by upper castes asserting their rights over water bodies, including wells, tanks and pipes, in Gurunagar and Alaveddy areas. Findings based on secondary data revealed the construction of 'caste water' texts by upper castes in cultural and religious domains, the doubling down of Dalit narratives and water knowledge explained that the high level of violence and discrimination historically experienced during water harvesting in South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, India, and Nepal. Thus, comparatively while incidents of violence related to access and availability of water have decreased in Jaffna's Dalit communities in comparison, discrimination and exclusion around water bodies has continued. On the other hand, in other South Asian countries like India and Nepal, incidents of violence near water bodies are increasing day by day. Thus, water access discrimination continues to be determined by caste and water access discriminatory practices adopted by upper castes reinforce the theory that Dalit women are untouchable.

**Key Words:** *Water, Caste, Gender, discrimination, violence*

## Introduction

The politics of caste in South Asian society is present in every aspect of social and cultural life, including food and eating practices and access to food. Dalits or women belonging to the Panchamar caste continue to face various hardships in meeting their basic needs due to their socially inferior caste identities. As such, it is an undeniable social fact that they are stigmatized by upper castes using caste terms such as impurity and dirt in their approach to food – as far as food is concerned, vegetables and grains are associated with purity (Brahmins). Beef and pork are associated with pollution (Dalits). Thus, the social recognition and power of the individual revolves around the caste identity in relation to one's basic need for food (especially whose food is clean? Whose food is impure? Who should be fed? How should they be fed? Shouldn't it be something to think about when caste dictates?)



Rajyashri Goody's 'Does Your Honesty Get You a Free Meal?' In particular, reading the poem "Water" from a recipe book on this topic inspired me to write this article. Who is this Rajyashri Goody? Belonging to the Dalit caste, she is a social anthropologist who has presented her work on food and caste politics. Her work on Dalit food products, eating practices, and accesses has helped her rethink the echoes of caste oppression and everyday forms of resistance built on food.

His work is a collection of poems retold from the stories and memories of Dalits. In the light of Rajyashri Goody's poetry, I examine how food and consumption practices (especially in water) in India create a unique social and political order based on caste hierarchy. His poem on water shows how the basic need for water is the result of centuries of suppression. In a web portal titled "Dalit Identity and Food - Memories of Trauma on a Plate", Rajyasree Goody makes an interesting point about "Dalit foods". "There are no 'Dalit cuisines' - culinary traditions," she cites. They are as diverse as the places and communities in which they originate.

Moreover, various scholarly literatures have been reviewed for this analysis and the problems faced by Dalit women/ Panchamars in accessing water in Jaffna city (Kurunagar) and village (Alaveddy) have been revealed through case studies. For this, 20 case studies (10 from Kurunagar city's Dalit women, 10 from Alaveddy village's Dalit women) have been drawn up for this article. Findings from this study conducted in rural and urban Jaffna reveal that access to water is determined by caste.

## Literature Review

Although water is an essential need for human beings, the dominance of the elite over water globally continues to be based on social, cultural, political and economic phenomena, especially caste, race, class and gender stratification.

### Power hierarchy in access to Water: Caste, Race, Class and Gender

The struggle for water is a struggle for power. Water is a basic human need that is limited. When it comes to water supply, social stratification factors such as caste, caste, class and status are closely related. So this action on water, associated with power, is a constraint on the behavior of those lower in the hierarchy. In Africa, household water use averages 47 liters per person. In Asia, the average is 95 liters. In the United Kingdom the average is 334 liters per person per day and in the United States the average is 578 liters per person per day (UNFPA, 2022). In India, more than 20% of Dalits do not have access to safe drinking water. 48.4% of Dalit villages are denied access to water. And the vast majority of Dalits depend on the goodwill of upper caste community members for access to water from public wells (Johns, 2011). On the other hand, Jegede and Shikwambane, (2021) research reveals a race disparity in access to water. He revealed that underprivileged black people living in rural areas of South Africa have been denied access to water based on apartheid politics. On the other hand Roy (2022) study reveals that water access denied by their caste and gender identities. He states that a century ago water distribution in India was based on status. Access to water was divided and unequal between households and communities. These were maintained based on the thought of ritual and purity. Although famine relief measures and droughts in the late 19th century led to the construction of wells, status-based access to water continued to be based on beliefs (ibid). Similarly Gautam et al (2018) studies reveals gender disparities in access to water, with disparities between rural and urban areas in Nepal, and access to water resources tends to benefit men and economically better-off households, leaving women without direct access or even the right to water. Thus there are cases where women depend on men for "open access" to water. The only way women can acquire rights to water is through inheritance after the death of their husbands. Other social norms around menstruation, cleanliness and pollution also restricted women and lower castes from drawing water from certain sources. A case study of the Asari drinking water supply system in eastern Nepal demonstrates how prevailing power relations and cultural differences of gender, caste and wealth greatly affected access to water from community taps. This example shows the gradual privatization of community pipes and the partial-privatization of the management of the system, with individual pipe owners de facto operating as micro-entrepreneurs who provide water services to others. Those without access to community piped water are predominantly from poor households – many of whom belong to marginalized and disempowered communities, including tenants and the landless (Udas, Roth et al., 2014). The study also found that in less developed countries such as Nepal, women experience more stress related to water scarcity or limited water supply than men. In most Nepali households, women are primarily responsible for doing chores such as cooking, cleaning and making sure there is enough water for other purposes.

They have to undertake tasks such as walking and waiting to collect water from public water sources, or resorting to water vendors and public wells. Among women living in areas with poor water supply service status (4-7 hours per week), 'difficulties in water-related household chores' and 'difficulties in water-related basic activities' were associated with psychological distress. Women in the South Asian context felt more responsible for the health of their family members, and the threat of disease from water scarcity to economize water for drinking, cooking, and hand washing led to disruptions in women's well-being shows the link between water scarcity and psychological and emotional stress in Nepal—it shows the effect of 'forgotten opportunity costs and social interactions', 'difficulties in housework' and 'difficulties in basic activities' as domains associated with psychological distress among women. And studies show that lack of access to water can make it difficult for women to wash cloths used to absorb menstrual blood, urinary tract infections and uterine prolapse due to fetching water from far away (ibid).

In contrast to Alam (2022) examines water access discrimination based on ethnicity in Bangladesh explore that access to improved drinking water sources is almost universal for the Bengali population, whereas only 61% of the minority ethnic population has such access. Almost 24% of households among minority ethnic groups have drinking water on premises free from *ESCHERICHIA COIL*, compared with 48% of Bengali households.

Therefore, based on the above studies, access to water and claiming rights over water is a universal social problem and it is a struggle for power or status. Denial of water to the weaker sections of the society based on caste, race, class and gender status continues to be used as a strategy to keep them at the bottom. Similarly, the analysis of the present study revealed that the limitations of water access in urban and rural Jaffna water bodies after the war in the Jaffna region, which maintains a strict caste structure, are based on caste and gender and geography.

## **Methodology**

**Study area:** Historically, life in Jaffna was defined primarily by caste identity (Suseendirajah, 1978). That is, an individual's livelihood, place of residence, socio-cultural relations, religious practice and the like were largely determined by caste (Lall, 2015). In this way, this study has been carried out in two different areas of Jaffna, namely, Alaveddy and Gurunagar. In this, the area of Alaveddy has been chosen to represent the village and the area of Gurunagar has been chosen to represent the city. The experiences of Dalits women regarding water rights, access and availability in rural and urban areas of Jaffna situation have been explored based on the temple public well of Alaveddy area and the tap water of Gurunagar area.

**Methods:** This study is based on qualitative research methodology. The study has been carried out using primary and secondary data collection methods. Case study and direct observation techniques have been used as primary data collection tools. Furthermore, various rich scholarly literatures particularly Novels, short stories, poems, researches, articles and news especially related to water and caste, gender status have been used as secondary data. The collected primary and secondary data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

**Samples:** 20 samples were purposively selected to carry out for this study. In this, 10 Dalit women who have access to the water of the temple public well have been selected from the village of Alaveddy and 10 Dalit women who have access to the tap water have been selected from the Gurunagar area.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Pollution, impurity, untouchability and water politics**

Access to and distribution of water is deeply intertwined with power structures. In South Asia, inequalities are socially embedded and ecologically shaped (Farhat Naz, 2015). At the local level, structures of power are embedded in class, caste, race, gender and religion. In this, the 'water-caste nexus' and the discrimination based on it have persisted in South Asian countries from the colonial period to the modern age of globalization. In this regard, many Dalit stories, biographies and testimonies often contain painful memories of the experience of water and lack of water resources. In the eyes of the 'upper castes' the image of water is purity, spiritual well-being, the object of worship, and sanctity, religious rituals are fundamental beliefs and practices that bind Dalits and prevent access to water.

Countries like India have many revolutionaries (Ambedkar, Periyar, Gandhi, Phule etc.) who spoke against caste discrimination. According to Ambedkar and Periyar, castes are classified on the basis of cleanliness and pollution associated with human bodily functions. Based on the varna system, roles related to thinking, speaking, teaching and learning are considered pure. Conversely, activities associated with waste, feet and skin are considered contaminated. Based on this, Brahmins were considered superior in terms of purity. Instead, Dalits were considered untouchable and polluted because of their association with animals and social waste. Periyar's speech at the inauguration of the well at the Gandhi Vasaka Library anniversary function held at Karaikudi Hospital on April 6, 1926, refers to untouchability. He says some insulting prejudices are used in the Shudra caste like 'you smell bad, you don't bathe, you don't wash your clothes, you eat beef, and you drink alcohol' - and how can Dalits bathe when wells/water access resources are closed? Can the clothes be washed? He also raised the question. And Ambedkar's autobiography 'Waiting for Visa' (1936) describes his experiences with untouchability. These stories tell how Ambedkar and his brothers struggled to drink water during their childhood.

*“One summer, he and his brothers came from out of town to meet their father. But their father did not receive the letter sent to pick them up from the railway station. After a long wait, they approached the station master got a bull card and left for Goregaon. However, the bullock driver soon learns that these well-dressed boys are untouchable. He felt that carrying these children in his cart would pollute the wooden cart and the domestic animals. So he did not load them in the bullock cart and took them to the cart. Thirsty, the boys travelled from evening to midnight towards their hometown—because they couldn't find drinking water anywhere—and every time they asked others for water, people pointed to dirty water and told them to look at it or asked them to leave. Ambedkar beautifully describes this situation, 'They have food to satisfy their hunger on the journey, but for want of water they cannot eat'” (Ambedkar, 1936) which reveals caste violence – that is, the denial of the so-called fundamental right of water to the lower castes”*

While the Brahmins are placed at the top of the caste structure in India, the dominant caste in Sri Lankan Tamil society is the Vellalar. In contrast, the Nalavar (throwers), Pallar (landless labourers), Paraiyar (funeral drummers), Vannan (dirty clothes washers), and Ambattan (barbers) are considered untouchables collectively referred to as Panchamars (Dalits) in Jaffna Tamil. These Punjabis were marginalized as a community with no access to drinking water and barred from entering tea shops (Silva, Sivaprakasam and Thanges, 2009). Similarly, Sri Lankan scholar Daniel's (from the Panjamar caste) novel 'Thanneer' (Water) has brought to light the problems faced by the Panjamar caste in accessing water. His writings examine how discrimination against Panchamar castes such as Nalavars, Pallars and Parayars (a Dalit caste) from accessing water was established by upper castes based on factors such as 'pollution, filthiness and the practice and logic of hygiene'. According to Daniel (1987), untouchable communities depended on upper-caste people for basic needs like water – Panchamar community of Jaffna was forbidden to draw water from public wells – Panchamar communities faced the plight of having to depend on their Vellala landlords for water – servants exploited this situation mercilessly and as a result Panchamars They exercised complete control over life (Geeta, 2011:37-40). In his writings, the Panchamar community is allowed to draw water from the well of the local landlord Chinnappa Nayanaar. This well is located in Nayanar Estate, two kilometres from Panchamar. Women have to walk through the fields to reach the well - women of this Panchamar caste have to wait for Nayanar's wife Nainadhi to distribute water. It is customary for the Nainadhi woman to be accompanied by her servant who draws water and gives two pots to each family. If any Panchamar caste violates this, they will be denied water supply immediately. Thus his writings expose the hierarchy within the Panchamar caste.

*1 Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji. “Waiting for a Visa” (2014) 661-691.*

".....Chelli, a Paraiyar caste, goes to Nayanar's well to draw water. Nainadhi not only refuses Chelli water but also insults her mother by accusing her of being an undisciplined woman. Chelli is enraged and dares to voice her protest without thinking of the consequences. An enraged Nainadhi immediately kills her. She grabs her long hair and orders her servant Chellappan to cut it off. All the women are denied water for the day- The families in the slum that day had no water to cook and they tried to use the water already in the pots. Knowing this, Nayanar sets their huts on fire and the Panchamars lose their homes. It also becomes a big problem for the community. Vellalars know that other castes below them are ready to give water to the Panchamar caste except for Vellalars, who throw dead cattle and human excreta into their wells Thus the author explains how Dalit (Panchamar) communities of Jaffna faced food violence and humiliation for more than a hundred years for water"

Thus the Dalit/Panchamar caste was denied access to water and writers belonging to that community brought these issues through their writings, especially short stories, novels and poetry.

### **Violence in water access.**

Swarup Dutta, Ishita Sinha and Aditya Parashar (2018) in their study based on five Indian states found that Dalit women face various problems in getting water from common water sources. In particular, 31.4% of women in Uttar Pradesh, 24.4% of women in Andhra Pradesh, 44.4% of women in Odisha, 52.9% of women in Madhya Pradesh and 30.4% of women in Bihar do not have access to potable water due to their caste identity and limited access to public resources – thus impairing their daily living activities. As their study reveals. And to date, Dalit people are struggling without getting water to quench their thirst. Many people's writings reveal the violence that Dalits face in getting water from public water sources. Abhijit (2023) mentions that there are many records to confirm this. Namely, in August 2022, a boy from Surana village in Rajasthan's Jalore district was beaten to death by his teacher for touching a drinking pot; In November 2022, a Dalit woman was assaulted for drawing water from a tube well in Rajasthan's Jodhpur district. Also, Elangovan, 2023 writings reveal that many Dalit children fell ill after upper castes dumped human excrement in the overhead tank that provided drinking water to Dalits in Pudukottai, Tamil Nadu. Similarly, Munshi Premchand's (2003:267-270) literary short story Tagore's Well tells us about caste discrimination, segregation and gender inequality. That is, when a Dalit woman called Gangi fetched water as usual and drank it for her husband who was sick, it was revealed that an animal had died in the water and it was contaminated by the stench of the water. Realizing that her ailing husband needs water, she tries to draw water from a well owned by an upper-caste Thakur. She is a Dalit caste woman so she is not allowed to use the well for water. So, she tries to fetch water from upper caste Tagore's well at night without anyone knowing for her thirsty and sick husband. She gets caught by Tagore at the last moment of fetching water and rushes back home without water. There her husband Joku drinks foul-smelling water due to extreme thirst. It is clear that the 'politics of water' is an important basis for confronting the oppression of exploited communities.

## Power dominance on water: Analysis Based on Rajyashri Goody's Poem

*After playing your drum  
In the wedding band  
For hours on end,  
You might be thirsty.  
Ask for water  
At a tank  
With little children playing  
And women using it.  
Someone might pour water  
In the hollow of your hands,  
Holding the pot  
High above.  
You might not be  
quenched.*

*As the water falls on you,  
you might step back  
and lose your balance.  
If your hand falls on the  
tank,  
a woman might see it  
and curse you.  
'You carrion!...  
What are we going to drink  
now.....  
your corpse?*

*The news might spread  
like wildfire.  
The bridegroom's father  
might empty the water tank  
and send someone  
on a bullock cart  
to fetch fresh water.  
Your father might not be able  
to contain himself.  
He might say  
You are insufferable.  
He might say  
you make him feel  
Like he has to eat  
his own shit.*

(Source: Rajyashri Goody's recipe booklet on 'Does your honesty earn you free meals?')

Goody's poem is based on the Kaikadi, a Dalit tribe in India (according to Lakshman Mane's autobiography). It was traditional for the Kaikadi tribe to play musical instruments during auspicious events such as childbirths and marriages. Palakku procession was a part of such auspicious events or festivals. No one provided water to the Dalits carrying palanquins during this event. Due to this, on many occasions, players who play musical instruments have fainted. However, none of the upper castes care about them. Despite these hardships for the Dalit community, the goodwill of the people remained intact. Despite performing their social duties honestly, these people face no retribution from others – the tragedies of their lives (Shelkiger, 2018, p. 27). The poem is based on the autobiography of Lakshman Mane and is written by Goody. Born in a Dalit community, Laxman Mane played bells in his childhood and later switched to playing drums. Laxman Mane in his childhood was playing musical instruments at a festival with his father and other companions when he felt thirsty and wanted to drink water, Thus he came to a water tank and asked the women there for water. The woman poured water from a very high place. He drank it frantically, but it was a feat to touch the water tank with his hand and drink the water till his thirst was quenched. But that was an incentive for the upper castes to beat him to death—the upper castes waited like hounds thirsty for his blood (ibid).

Based on Laxman Mane's autobiography, she reveals how the Dalit castes struggle to access the basic necessity of water in this poem. As caste apartheid is perpetuated only through exploitation, 'water' is seen as a powerful strategy of oppression in a social system run by elite societies.



## Gender, caste, geography and power in water access

In Jaffna, Dalits, known as Panchamars in the caste system, continue to occupy a low social status. They still face widespread discrimination in Jaffna and are called 'untouchables'. They are not allowed to enter some temples. They are not allowed to touch food in public gatherings. They are also prohibited from using public taps, fetching water and drinking. Thus in Jaffna's Kurunagar area, there are caste-based settlements on every street. Water pipes have been set up separately for the streets that express this caste. Also, the data revealed that the women belonging to Dalit or Panchamar Street can only get water from their taps by waiting in line, but they are not allowed to touch the drinking water tap set up in the street of upper castes and get water from it. Similarly Lall (2015) studies found that there are 18 water taps and 3 community wells located in Thirunagar area in Jaffna where is near to Gurunagar area. A forth well used by people from Thirunagar is near the church, which is a five to ten minute walk from Thirunagar, depending on the household's location. The taps are connected to an underground piping system provided by the Jaffna Municipal Council that carries potable water to the larger coastal area. Four taps are along Rajasingam Road, and the rest are located within the lanes. Further in, there are taps in close proximity to surrounding houses with pipes connected to the taps leading into the compounds of those homes. As a result, women in those households do not need to leave their compound to get water and are rarely seen outside their homes. Lall (2015:16) highlight an interview of women from Thirunagar area that high calcium content in the drinking water had caused an unclear in her stomach for which she got operated. However she had continued to use the tap water for herself and her family. The number of households drawing water from taps varies by location. The less populated Rajasingham road has five to seven households that draw water from each tap, whereas taps further in are used by as many as thirteen families. Households pay a fee of Rs 60 per month to the Jaffna Municipal Council for the water connection. The positioning of the taps near the community leader's house illustrates how access to services is negotiated by power holders in the community to suit their interests. Meanwhile in the change in accessing water reveals how the geography of the public provisioning of water can alter norms- women from certain households no longer join other women to collect water- and lead to segregation between and within a community (ibid).

On the other hand, women in the village of Alaveddy in Jaffna use the temple wells as public well to get drinking water. In these wells, the method of drawing water through a pulley is still found. However, the upper castes do not use this scoop and bucket to draw water. Case studies revealed that because Panchamars use temple buckets to collect water, the upper castes consider them impurity. As a result, the upper castes bring a bucket from home to draw drinking water from the temple well and use it separately. Also, the data indicates that while the Dalit women are fetching water, the upper caste women do not come near the well, and stand far away from them, and the Dalit women used draw water in temple bucket. While fetching water, Upper caste women do not place their water buckets in the place used by Dalit women, they place their buckets on top of the cement tank or the well. And before draw water, upper caste women clean the place with water where Dalit women stand in the well.

Similarly John (2011) studies found that while accessing water Dalit women stand in separate queues near the bore well to fetch water till the non-Dalits finish fetching water. Moreover Dalits are disempowered and not allowed to use taps and wells located in non-Dalits area. Therefore Dalit women are not denied water in Jaffna, the destination. They did not suffer without drinking water and were not subjected to violence like Indian Dalit women. However, the fact that Dalit women are inferior and not equal to upper-caste women is reflected in the different equipment used to draw water. Also, the caste-based tube wells in Jaffna's Kurunagar area show that Dalits are untouchables. Therefore, we can conclude that South Asian Dalit women continue to be marginalized due to water politics.

## Conclusion

Caste ideology of purity and pollution dominates the social structure, leading to water-based exploitation and discrimination. Based on Rajyashri Goody's work, Dalit castes are identified based on occupation. Thus Dalits were denied access to water – indicating that they were denied to touch the upper caste's water tank/pot. Likewise, the literature reviews mentioned above reveal how Dalit women in India and Panchamar women in Sri Lanka are excluded from society through the politics of 'water' and the violence they face as they struggle to meet the basic need for water. Dalit women in India are still struggling to get water for their families. On the contrary, in today's Jaffna society, especially in the rural areas, it is accepted for the Panchamar caste to draw water from public (temple) wells. However, the data reveals that Panchamars use the equipment set up in the temple to fetch water, while the upper castes refuse to use it and use the equipment they bring from their homes. On the other hand, in urban areas of Jaffna, water pipes are installed on every street along caste lines. So we can clearly understand in the South Asian socio-cultural context that the dynamics of caste politics are built into water distribution practices. Based on this study findings those who want to study this issue in the future should pay attention to the influence of social stratification factors in accessing water and sanitary facilities based on the infrastructural facilities set up in resettlement areas after the war.

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