

The Burden of Water

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“*Water, the stuff of life,*” remarks Anne Hathaway’s character in the popular film *Interstellar* when she comes across a planet with water in another galaxy. With the hope to save humankind from extinction, she, along with her fellow astronauts and scientists, go on an intergalactic journey. They went with the assumption that if they found water, humans would have a fighting chance of survival.

The filmmakers must be unaware of the struggles that millions of people face every day to get access to water, especially the marginalized *Dalit* (so-called “untouchable”) women living in India, for whom “*the stuff of life*” is a massive burden they bear every day. Water may help humans survive, but it cannot do much for humanity.

India, where 600 million are affected by water scarcity every year (source: [NITI Aayog 2019](#)), is also a country deeply divided on the basis of Caste (a Hindu system of social segregation). Despite the “Right to Equality” enshrined in the Indian Constitution, Caste has a considerable role to play in determining an individual’s access to social and economic opportunities. The Caste structure, a 3000-year old system, even controls which community would have easier access to artificial and natural resources until this day.

In the country where systems are already skewed on the basis of gender, the Caste structure has a considerable impact on the socio-economic status of an Indian woman and thrives on Brahminical patriarchy (*Brahmins* are the so-called “upper” Caste community). The manifestation of this form of patriarchy ranges from casual casteism and sexism to unequal access to healthcare, water, education, and legal systems to brutal killings, rapes, and complete dehumanization of Dalit women.

Water vs. Caste Hierarchy



48.4% of Dalit villages are denied access to a water source (UN High Commission for Human Rights)

The majority of Dalit families live in rural India. They live in areas that are often furthest from the center of the village where the water source is located. Their so-called “untouchability” makes them ineligible to live in the prominent areas of the village, which are culturally reserved for “upper” Caste families. With only 27% of Dalit households with a water source (not necessarily fit for drinking) within their premises, tens of thousands of Dalit women start their day early in the morning, travel kilometers, stand in queues for hours to fetch water for their families. They repeat the same ritual in the evening. Predictably, they suffer from regular backache, joint pain, and muscle problems. Even their sleep cycles are severely affected. However, they are usually not even aware of the cause of these health issues.

Given how patriarchy has assigned gender roles, the responsibility of collecting, using, and saving water falls on women and girls. Young girls carrying buckets of water on their heads is not an uncommon sight in rural India. In some cases, it affects their height and physical growth as well.

Additionally, even today, the practice of untouchability continues unchecked. There are multiple cases of Dalit women facing violence when they tried accessing water from a public source because they were considered “impure” by the so-called “upper” Caste women and men.

Water Scarcity and Dalit Women



India is ranked 5th in the Global Climate Risk Index (2019)

Climate change would not just manifest in the form of natural disasters. It would also widen the current gender-based inequalities. A report released by the central government in 2019 outlines that less rainfall and groundwater depletion led to water shortage in 17% of cities and towns across India. The growing water scarcity due to climate change would make the situation even worse for the Dalit community, especially the women. Caste and gender hierarchies make Dalit women the most vulnerable group in the climate change pecking order. For instance, the water riots in Bundelkhand (a drought-

prone region in northern India) forced a Dalit woman to file a police complaint because Dalit women were beaten up for using government handpumps.

Solutions with Gendered and Caste-based Perspectives

Water is a precious commodity and will be even more valuable as the world struggles to cope with climate change. Given this situation, it is essential to take into account that any particular social issue affects marginalized communities in more than one way. As governments and international organizations design solutions, they must integrate the gender and Caste-based experiences of Dalit women and involve them in every level of decision-making.