



## THE DEBATE BETWEEN PURITY AND POLLUTION: DALIT ECOLOGY IN CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

*In the Indian caste based social construct Dalits belong to the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. They are the most discriminated against and humiliated segment of the society who are not only dominated by the Brahminical hegemony but are also forced to be involved in petty menial jobs which makes them susceptible to ecological hazards. Further, their unhygienic living condition, lack of sanitation facilities dehumanize their state of living and make them vulnerable to ecological precarity. It is an irony that though they are involved in all kinds of agricultural activities, they are denied the right to be owners of lands which is the privilege of the “pure” upper castes. The Dalit bodies are considered to be “impure” and their touch is “polluting”. Hence they are denied the basic ecological resources like drinking water and land. The binary between “pure” and “impure” is stretched to the level of relegating the Dalits to the verge of being sources of pollution though they consistently work to keep the environment pure by being an integral part of waste and pollution management. This paper will try to locate the lacuna in the caste-based social construct where Dalits are striving to maintain ecological purity but are themselves stigmatized as being sources of pollution.*

**Key Words:** Ecology, Dalit, Pure, Impure, Pollution.

**DR. MAHUYA BHAUMIK**

1 Page



## INTRODUCTION

“Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place. Its very invisibility is what gives it power and longevity. And though it may move in and out of consciousness, though it may flare and reassert itself in times of upheaval and recede in times of relative calm, it is an ever present through the line in the country’s operation”, observes Isabel Wilkerson, Pulitzer Prize Winner Journalist with New York Times in her article ‘America’s Enduring Caste System’, July 2020 (Das. <https://www.youth4nature.org/stories/caste-climate>). This observation regarding the ever-present discrimination based on caste is the perennial truth as far as the Indian socio-cultural, economic, ecological and political aspects are concerned.

“What is so peculiar about our touch that it pollutes water, food, houses, clothes, graveyards, tea shops, God, religion, and even man?” (Limbale 81) Thus, the question is of what is pure and what is polluted. The Dalits had always been considered untouchables because their touch would pollute the upper castes. If by any chance a Brahmin was touched by the shadow of a Dalit on a road, then the Brahmin would have to be sanctified by cowdung and water. Thus Brahmins have been associated with purity and Dalits with impurity and pollution since several years. Dalits being associated with all sorts of menial job like sewage cleaning, handling skins of dead animals, waste and pollution, are considered “unfit for human association”, as Ambedkar points out (Ambedkar 93). They are considered as “mobile dirt” (Guru 91) and inhabit the most unhygienic, dirty, dingy ghettos at the outskirts with almost no facilities of sanitation and health.

How ironic is the situation that those who are handling waste and pollution, risking their own health and hygiene and keeping the environment safe, are considered to be sources of pollution. They drudge on the field yet they do not have any right on the soil and are landless because being the landlord is the prerogative of the upper castes. They toil throughout the day and serve the upper castes, yet they have no right on the basic ecological resources like water and soil.

The linkage between land rights and the right to food is intrinsic to the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. Jean Ziegler, the former Special Rapporteur, rightly points out: “Access to land is one of the key elements necessary for eradicating hunger in the world”, and asserts: “Many rural people suffer from hunger because either they are landless, they do not hold secure tenure or their properties are so small that they cannot grow enough food to feed themselves” (United Nations. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, UN Doc. A/57/356, 2002 <http://www.righttofood.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/A573561.pdf>).



Ziegler observes: “Widespread discrimination prevents Dalits from owning land, as they are seen as the ‘worker class’, and even if they receive land (as a result of redistribution and agrarian reform programmes in some states), such land is frequently taken by force by higher caste people in the area.” (Gilbert. United Nations. 2006c. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Addendum, Mission to India 20 August- 2 September 2005, E/CN.4/2006 <https://sur.conectas.org/en/land-rights-human-rights/>)

Incidents of brutality based on denial of land rights which are unleashed upon Dalits who are working close to the soil are innumerable and are everyday realities. March, 2024 witnessed chilling brutality in Silai Baragaon, north-western Uttar Pradesh, when police atrocities claimed the life of an innocent Dalit boy. The Scheduled Caste community of the locality revamped a dumping ground in association with local administration and turned it into a park. However, a complaint of “land grabbing” was lodged and the police came for a probe into the matter. But, quite shockingly, the probe led to Dalit adolescents being allegedly shot at ..... and one dies of a bullet injury.” (Lakshman. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/death-of-dalit-teen-in-up-murder-in-blue-blood/article67922131.ece>). Another news report verifies that 16 Dalit people were locked up for days in a coffee plantation in Chikkamagaluru, Karnataka and tortured. One of them, a pregnant woman, lost her baby after being assaulted, as per police report. (Sreeja. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/16-dalits-tortured-locked-up-in-karnataka-pregnant-woman-loses-baby-3421691>). In January 2023 inhuman attitude of upper caste people reached its crescendo when even a Dalit child studying in class three was not spared during a land dispute and his dead body was found hanging from a tree in the village farm. *The Times of India* reported that the horrifying incident occurred in Rafatpur with a mixed population of upper castes and Dalits that resulted in the land dispute and led to the savagery. (Singh. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bareilly/dalit-boy-killed-hung-on-tree-by-upper-caste-men-in-ups-budaun/articleshow/97264615.cms>)

According to Section 42 of the 1955 Rajasthan Tenancy Act, property owned by a member of a Scheduled Caste (SC) community cannot be transferred or sold to a person from any other community, including Scheduled Tribes (ST). However, in May, 2015 more than 200 people hailing from the Jat community assaulted and killed five Dalits in Dangawas village in Rajasthan's Nagaur district over a land dispute in which a Jat family claimed that the disputed land was sold by a Dalit in 1964. The Dalit family opposed the claim saying that they had only given cultivating rights to the Jat family. Reports stated: “Members of Jat community from the village attacked the Dalit family with arms, sticks, sharp-edged weapons. Dalit Women were molested, men were severely beaten.” (Gaur. <https://www.landconflictwatch.org/conflicts/dangawas-caste-clash>). In September 2022, members of the Dalit community started protesting against the illegal transfer of their lands in Dosapadu village of Krishna district in Andhra Pradesh. These lands were allocated to the Dalit community in 1965 by the Andhra Pradesh State Government under the provisions of



the Andhra Pradesh Assigned Lands Act, 1977. The objective of this land allocation was to support the livelihood of the Dalits and ensure their social uplifting. However, even after prolonged legal battle no solution could be attained in favour of the Dalits. Hence, the Dalits decided to enter their lands. However, "Officials of Krishna district along with State police imposed sections 144 and 145 in the area and dispersed the protest" and even in 2023 the Dalits failed to regain control of the lands which were actually allocated to them. (Chatterjee. <https://www.landconflictwatch.org/conflicts/dalits-protest-against-illegal-capture-of-lands-assigned-to-them-in-andhra-pradesh>)

The Land Conflict Watch report points out that the Dalits are the "largest landless social group in the country" and are not, in several cases, able to own lands. According to the India Land and Livestock Holding Survey, "almost 60% of Dalit households did not own any farmland in 2013." (Gokhale. <https://www.indiaspend.com/dalit-battles-for-promised-lands-rage-across-india/#:~:text=Almost%2060%25%20dalit%20households%20did,others%2C%20according%20to%20Census%202011.>) This issue is of grave concern because landlessness among Dalits is integrally linked with the ancient caste system practised in India that prohibited Dalits from owning land as they were considered impure and untouchable. This, in turn, compelled them to undertake menial jobs associated with their caste. The Land Conflict Watch report makes it evident that even after several years have passed by, Dalits continue to be excluded from owning property which is an issue that is directly linked to economic and social inequality and land conflicts across India. The report documents 31 ongoing land conflicts involving at least 92,000 Dalits in 13 states. "This report warrants all actors to look at land with a different perception, as to how it affects people at large, whose life and livelihood is based on land. The land has been viewed as a commodity by the development sector, but that is the base for the dignity and identity of Dalits. India is still known as an agricultural country, but the agricultural sector and Dalits who put their sweat and labour are side-lined and ignored," said Vincent Manoharan who is the chairperson of the National Federation of Dalit Land Rights Movements. (Aggarwal. <https://scroll.in/article/955147/whose-land-is-it-anyway-of-indias-703-ongoing-conflicts-25-are-in-tribal-areas>)

The denial of ecological rights to Dalits can be analysed from another source of deprivation. Water, the fundamental human right, is not accessible to several Dalits and is a source of major worry as far as the Indian ecological discourse is concerned. In Rajasthan's Jalore district, a nine year old Dalit student named Indra Meghwal was beaten to death in school for touching an upper-caste teacher's water pot. (The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/dalit-boy-beaten-to-death-for-touching-water-pot-ncpcr-asks-rajasthan-government-to-take-strict-action/article65774943.ece>).



Instances of discrimination and torture endured by Dalit students in schools for drinking water are innumerable. Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh witnessed a sixteen year old Dalit boy being assaulted by the principal of his school for drinking water from his bottle. A teacher in Jalaun district of Uttar Pradesh punished a Dalit child for drinking water from a pond. Rajasthan's Netrad village saw the physical abuse of a Dalit boy by his teacher for drinking water from the school pot. (Waghre. <https://thewire.in/caste/caste-water-access-missing-india-environmental-discourse>). In another incident in Kerala a 15 year old Dalit boy named Vishnu Pranav went to take bath in a nearby temple pond as there was an absolute dearth of water at home since the last few days. As a punishment he was assaulted by a man and had to be admitted in a hospital. The man who assaulted the Dalit boy clearly stated the reason for the assault: "The temple pond is not for Dalit boys." The boy recounted the brutality of the attack on him. "He started attacking me, first he hit my neck and threw away my spectacles. When I tried to bend down and pick up the glasses, he again pulled me up, hit my back and then held me against a metal sheet and punched my stomach," Vishnu reported to the police. (Joseph. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/dalit-boy-kerala-allegedly-assaulted-trying-bathe-temple-pond-120028>). Incidents showcasing denial of water based on caste discrimination are rampant. A Dalit man was asked by a police to quench his thirst by drinking his own urine in Andhra Pradesh's Godavari district in 2023. (Raj. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/amaravati/cop-asks-dalit-youth-to-drink-his-urine-in-police-station-in-andhra-pradesh-case-registered/articleshow/102863150.cms>)

Water for Dalits, is the symbol of deprivation and marginalization. It is a bare minimum necessity for them to carry on with their lives. However, for the upper castes water has a far wider connotation. It symbolizes "cleanliness, spiritual well-being, an object of worship, holy sanctity, religious rituals, and that which washes away impurities and pollutants." (Aiyadurai. <https://thewire.in/caste/even-after-a-century-water-is-still-the-marker-of-indias-caste-society>). That is why water is always kept away from the 'impure' and 'polluted' presence of the Dalits by the 'pure' upper castes. Hence, water is a 'caste burden' (Aiyadurai. <https://thewire.in/caste/even-after-a-century-water-is-still-the-marker-of-indias-caste-society>) for the Dalits who are consistently reminded of their subservient position by the denial of their rights for water.

It is alarming to note that about 71% of Dalit settlements in rural areas do not have access to public water supplies (Kashwan. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/water/access-to-water-is-acrisis-for-the-powerless95180#:~:text=About%2071%20per%20cent%20of,abuse%20by%20upper%20caste%20men.>). Water scarcity and socio-economic and political differences are intertwined with each other and cannot be ignored. If the fear of 'purity' of the upper castes being defiled by the touch of the 'impure' Dalits persists in the psyche of the upper castes, then discriminatory practices regarding access to basic ecological resources will continue. However, if ecological balance and sustainability are to be discussed then Dalits cannot be

**DR. MAHUYA BHAUMIK**

5 Page





relegated to the margin and denied the basic rights. “Questions of purity-pollution or ‘division of labourers’ rather than division of labour – the constitutive features of India’s caste hierarchy”(Waghre. <https://thewire.in/caste/caste-water-access-missing-india-environmental-discourse>) has to be addressed if environmental and ecological studies are to be done from the Indian context. National Crime Records Bureau Report, 2021 shows that most caste atrocities unleashed upon Dalits are pertaining to conflicts based on accessibility to drinking water resources. The uninhabitable regions where the Dalits are compelled to live fail to provide them with adequate drinking water facilities. The Dalits, because of their locations and professions, are susceptible to diseases related to unhygienic lived in conditions. They are the ones who take care of the waste water infrastructure and ironically, they are also the ones who are denied access to safe drinking water. They are the human scavengers fighting against all odds to keep the environment clean, but themselves are immersed in filth and dirt, toiling for the minimum ecological resources. “The constitutive linkages between caste and the water cycle have to be understood to actually ensure human dignity and equal rights of access to water for every individual in India.”(Waghre. <https://thewire.in/caste/caste-water-access-missing-india-environmental-discourse>)

“While the climate crisis manifests globally, we need to acknowledge that indigenous peoples, low-income families, people of colour, and other historically marginalized groups like the Dalits represent frontline communities who experience harmful climate impacts ‘first and worst’, rightly observes Isabel Wilkerson (Das. <https://www.youth4nature.org/stories/caste-climate>).

To aim at a sustainable future for all, we should all pledge to eradicate all forms of segregation and marginalization, address the historical injustices and provide solutions which would rightly address all the systemic inequities and inequalities. If ecological balance is to be restored then ecological precarities are to be addressed and ecological rights ensured for all. Dalit bodies which are emblems of pollution and impurity, toiling in dehumanized social and ecological conditions are to be included in the mainstream so that they receive a life with basic ecological rights and hygienic living conditions. The taboo of pollution and impurity associated with them are to be done away with. India’s battle with climate change can only be made successful if dignity is associated with manual labour and Dalits are stopped being considered impure. The battle between purity and impurity based on caste has to be stopped with immediate effect if ecological balance has to be ensured in India and if sustainability has to be brought in.

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**DR. MAHUYA BHAUMIK**

6 Page



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