

Water, Hindu Mythology and an Unequal Social Order in India

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Abstract

This paper analyses Vedic philosophy¹, the structural basis of currently practised Hinduism, to identify that water and the human body in the Hindu social system are not merely physical entities. Water has, since the Vedic periods, been recognised as a primordial spiritual symbol (Baartmans, 1990). Similarly, Vedic philosophy describes the symbolic division of *Purusa*, or the Eternal Man, into four *varnas* or classes, Brahmans, Rajanyas (Kshatriyas), Vaisyas and Sudras. The social hierarchy of the caste system in Hindu society is said to have originated from this four-fold class system (Prabhu, 1939; Das, 1982; Murray, 1994). The caste system, a product of post-Vedic philosophy, ascribes states of ritual purity and pollution to the human body on account of caste or rather caste-based occupation and gender. Water has since then been recognised as an instrument to determine the rigours of socio-ritual purity and pollution of the human body. This paper shows, through field research on water use in a rural Hindu society, that caste based socially hierarchy is determined locally through notions of purity and pollution. These notions are used in local culture in determining and reinforcing an inequitable access to, control over and distribution of water and water use rights. It is argued that popular policy visions of restoring the community's supremacy in water management can be counter-productive and reinforce existing inequality if the basis and reality of social inequality is ignored and the existence of a 'unitary, egalitarian and altruistic' community is assumed.

¹ The term Vedic philosophy refers to ethical thought presented in Vedic literature written during the period 2500-600 BC. There is much conflict on the exact duration of the period. The literature consisted of 2 major bodies of literature, the Vedas and the later Brahmanas.

Water, Social Stratification and Hinduism

‘This knife has been with our family for generations. We did change the handle several times and the blade, sometimes, yet it is still the same knife²’.

Analysing social relations in contemporary India, Dube (1996) declares that, ‘Caste is not dead and its boundaries and hierarchies are articulated by gender’. Jaiswal (1998) similarly propounds that the institution of caste continues to pose serious problems in the restructuring of Indian society, as traditional practices of discrimination on account of birth and gender tenaciously persist. Others, however, claim that social inequality persists, but is no longer determined by the traditional social hierarchy of the caste system. Traditionally dominant castes are no longer the most powerful, as parameters determining social dominance have changed and continue to change with history (Assayag, 1995; Srinivas, 1998).

Despite the contradiction, it is agreed generally that the basis of the caste system is determined by notions of purity and pollution, themes which are identified as central to Hindu culture (Dumont, 1980 quoted by Murray, 1994). Impurity is symbolised by the peripheral extremities of the human body. ‘All margins...and matter issuing from them are considered polluting... hair, nails...spittle, blood, semen, urine, faeces or even tears’ (Das, 1982; Murray, 1994). Human bodies in the act and process of producing bodily secretions or associating with these matters are recognised as polluting. Impurity is also incurred during birth and death; however, while birth signifies ‘auspicious impurity’ death is considered as ‘inauspicious impurity’ (Das, 1982).

In the socially graded system, *Brahmans* are considered to be the purest, as a result of their occupational involvement in ritual and religious activities. These tasks are considered to be the most superior and purest of all social activities. At the other end of the social continuum, the *Sudras* are identified as defiled as a result of the defiling activities that they have socially been obliged to engage in (Murray, 1994). *Sudras* have historically been assigned the tasks of cremating the human dead, handling dead animals, handling human faeces, cutting hair, nails and washing and cleaning processes associated

² Extract from a folktale about ...a philosopher in India, Ramanujan 1990, quoted by Assayag 1995.

with bodily excrements. As a result of their occupational association with polluted social events and polluted human matter, they are considered as eternally polluted and polluting (Dube, 1996). It is believed that in the Vedic period, individuals with a certain aptitude for these activities chose to perform such tasks. In later periods, as the classes became transformed into a rigid social system of castes, tasks were determined not by aptitude or preference but were inherited at birth. Thus *Sudras* remained bound to performing these tasks through generations. Similarly, all women, regardless of their social caste, cyclically incur pollution through the bodily processes of menstruation and childbirth.

The core concern of Hindu ritualism is concerned with the manipulation and maintenance of purity and impurity. Purity is increased by associating or coming into contact with things and actors assigned pure status and by reducing association with things and actors of impure status. There are essentially two ways to bring about a condition of purity, one is to distance oneself from objects signifying impurity and the other is to purify oneself by things recognised to have the ability to absorb and thus remove pollution directly. Water is the most common medium of purification. It is considered to have an intrinsic purity and the capacity to absorb pollution and carry it away (Babb, 1975 quoted by Murray, 1994).

To unfold the context of social stratification in Indian Hindu society and to determine the role of water in the regulation of social order it is essential to go:

- Back into history to trace the origin of the institution of these belief systems and
- Forward into existing social and cultural contexts to identify whether the institution of the caste system still exists and if it does then in what shape, context and pattern in relation to water use practices.

The Vedic Period³ - the Sanctification of Water

In Vedic texts, water is referred to as *Apah*, or literally the Waters. The Waters are considered to be purifying in a spiritual context.

‘Hail to you, divine, unfathomable, all purifying Waters...’(Rg Veda).

³ 2000-600 BC. MacNicol 1915, though some trace the origin of this period to 2500 BC.

The Rg Veda identifies the Waters as the first residence or *ayana* of *Nara*, the Eternal Being and therefore water is said to be *pratishtha*, the underlying principle, or the very foundation of this universe. 'Water may pour from the heaven or run along the channels dug out by men; or flow clear and pure having the Ocean as their goal...In the midst of the Waters is moving the Lord, surveying men's truth and men's lies. How sweet are the Waters, crystal clear and cleansing...From whom... all the Deities drink exhilarating strength, into whom the Universal Lord has entered...'(Satpatha Brahmanas). Early Vedic texts also identify water as a manifestation of the feminine principle, known commonly as *Sakti*. 'I call the Waters, Goddesses, wherein our cattle quench their thirst; Oblations to the streams be given...'(Rg Veda). It is said that the primordial cosmic man or *Purusa* was born of the Waters. Similarly later Vedic texts identify that, 'Water is female...'(Satpatha Brahmanas).

Vedic philosophy thus bestows a sacred character on water, which is then identified as a medium to attain spiritual enlightenment. The concept of purification in early Vedic texts was essentially spiritual, rather than moral and/or physical. Understanding the primary meaning and force of water was considered to supersede all ritual and rite (Baartmans 1990). The Vedas identify water as the very essence of spiritual sacrifice or 'the first door to attain the divine order' (Atharva Veda). The use of water in daily life as well as in ritualistic ceremony was referred to as spiritual sacrifice, a process of attaining eternity.

A cleansing bath was believed to liberate one from sin and impurity:

'...Whatever sin is found in me, whatever wrong I may have done,
if I have lied or falsely sworn, Waters remove it far from me...' (Rg Veda).

The act of bathing was considered intensely spiritual and it was believed that physical acts of imperfection were removed and spiritual oneness with the Eternal Self was attained during the process. According to the Vedas, it was not the act of taking a bath itself, but the coming into contact with the sacredness of water, and the attainment of such knowledge and proximity that made one sinless and guided the individual to the Eternal Self. Water was considered sacred but it was clarified that man does not pray to

water, the physical entity, but to the source of life and spirituality within water. 'Water is the purified as well as the purifier, the real and spiritually conceived source of life' (Baartmans, 1990).

Social Order in Vedic Philosophy

In the early Vedic period, social stratification in human society existed on the basis of colour, class, individual capacity, occupational aptitude and moral and intellectual worth, rather than on the later determined caste system, which is based on inheritance-based rights and privileges (Kane 1974; Crawford 1982). The first instance of social distinction is made on the colour and culture differences between the fair skinned *Aryas* and the dark skinned *Dasas*. Then, the division of mankind into four *varnas* from the *Purusa* or the Eternal Man is described in the hymn, *Purusa Sukta* of the Rg Veda: 'When they divided Man, how many did they make Him. The *Brahman* was his mouth; his arms were made the *Rajanya* (Kshatriya); his thighs were the *Vaisya*; from his feet the *Sudra* was born'. Social hierarchy in the early Vedic society is believed to have been divinely-ordained. Historians argue that the *varna* system was an 'open class system', of flexible membership and the construction of castes and the rigid caste system did not begin in the early Vedic period (Kane, 1974). 'The Vedic quadripartition of classes or colours (*Varnasrama*) is not to be confused with the notion of caste or *jati* as this was merely a social model based on a cosmic paradigm of hierarchy' (Assayag, 1995). However the system of social stratification was established in the early Vedic period, even if it was flexible and not inherently binding. The Rg Veda defines *varnas* and designated occupations, 'One to high sway (*Brahmana*), one to exalted glory (*Kshatriya*), one to pursue his gain (*Vaisya*) and one to his labour (*Sudra*).' *Brahmans* were to be the teachers of mankind, *Kshatriyas* were to carry weapons and protect people, *Vaisyas* were to provide food for the people and the *Sudras* were to be the footmen or servants of the other *varnas*, even if they had all originated from the same Eternal Man (Prabhu, 1939). Despite the obvious social stratification in the early Vedic period, historians identify that there was no concept of untouchability, of physical purity and pollution, of prevention of social relations between individuals of different *varnas* in early Vedic literature (Kane, 1974; Jaiswal, 1998). However it is agreed that by the later Vedic periods, social

hierarchy had been established and the *Brahmans*, men devoted to learning and priesthood had come to be regarded as superior by mere birth. Similarly the inferiority of certain *jatis* or social groups within the *Sudra varna*, such as the *candalas* or those undertaking cremation tasks, had been established (ibid).

The Post Vedic Periods⁴ and the Institutionalisation of Water-related Social Inequality

In contrast to the notion of spirituality in early Vedic texts, *Smrtis* or post Vedic literature constructed the notion of ritualism. Water governed the ritualistic or bodily purification of human existence. Ritualism was related to the construct of *Dharma* or moral law and the most authoritative text on the subject of *Dharma* is the ‘Laws of Manu’, or *Manusmrti* (Crawford, 1982). Manu is blamed for creating the caste system, however some authors argue that he may have simply recorded the system of social order that existed then (Kane, 1974). What matters though, is that Manu and other lawmakers of this period codified the social order as morally appropriate social behaviour, social duties and obligations. Social obligations and duties were classified as contributing to religious ritualism, which explains why the religiously inclined Hindus tenaciously practise *Dharma* as their culture. *Dharma* persists steadfastly in Hindu society, despite the fact that there is no watchdog, like the Western Church, to enforce moral regulations (Nagarajan, 1994).

Murray (1994) lists the structural features of the caste system, as expounded by Manu, which are said to have changed little in contemporary social practice:

- The *Brahmans*’ continuous cultural prominence in religious ritualism
- A rigid caste status assigned solely on the basis of inheritance
- The centrality of a person’s caste in his/her social life, prohibition of mobility across caste boundaries maintained by the regulation of marriage and eating arrangements; enormous social energies devoted to maintaining caste boundaries
- Extensive norms and elaborate rituals prescribed for regulating social stratification, based on the centrality of the concept of *Dharma*.

⁴ 500 B.C. to 300 AD, MacNicol 1915.

The lawbooks or *Dharmasastras* defined in very clear terms how *Sudras* were, on the basis of their inherited status to undertake defiling and/or polluting tasks. In order to maintain purity, the *Sudras* who were essentially bound to undertake polluting tasks were excluded physically, socially and morally from the larger village commune. *Sudras*, identified in the *Dharmasastras* as the very essence of pollution, were required to live outside the village confines. Fa Hein, the Chinese traveller to India, writes about how in a public place, the *Candalas* had to give notice of their approach by striking a piece of wood, to warn others to avoid contact with them (Kane, 1994). Any physical association of a *Sudra*, especially a *Sudra* male with women of other castes, was a severely punishable act for the *Sudra*, which could lead to castration or even death, even if the association was mutually desired. Purification of touch by a *Sudra* involved taking a cleansing bath; talking to a *Sudra* was purified by talking to a *Brahman*; and the sight of a *Sudra* was purified by looking at the sun, moon or stars and rinsing the mouth with water (*acamana*). In the *Dharmasastras*, water was identified as a medium to purify the pollution obtained through the *Sudras*. The *Manusmriti* also elaborates how water and food cooked in water, offered or touched by the *Sudras*, was polluting. It was stated that when *Sudras* touch a well or any other stagnant water source, the source and the water is polluted. Manu went to the extent of elaborating rituals to be performed to purify such polluted water (Khera, 1997). According to the *Dharmasastras* the *Sudras* had no God and therefore were to be excluded from all religious knowledge and ritualism, which was the very basis of Hindu existence. It is fair to say that in the post-Vedic period the *Sudras* were isolated from the other social, now caste groups and thus contextually removed from the class of humans and assigned the status similar to that ascribed to animals. There are numerous parallels drawn in the *Dharmashastras* between socially belittled animals, like dogs and pigs, and the *Sudras*.

According to Manu, apart from the eternally polluted *Sudras*, all persons became polluted and therefore 'untouchable' during birth and death in the house. Those touching members mourning during death, touching the corpse and/or carrying the corpse to the cemetery were identified as polluted. Drawing parallel with the notion of pollution accorded to

death, *Sudras* were likened by him to ‘a living cemetery’. Women, on account of their bodily secretions during their menstrual cycle and immediately after childbirth, were identified as polluting regardless of their caste. During this period, all of the restrictions detailed for the *Sudras* were exercised on them. Those touching menstruating women or touching women during the first ten days after childbirth were also considered as polluting. Water was ascribed as a medium to purify all these forms of pollution.

Ritually-determined Social Stratification in Contemporary Hindu Society

Theoretical texts endlessly debate the validity of history in interpreting local culture. Sax, (1991) argues that, ‘...the hackneyed dualities of Hindu history, of sacred and profane, of body and ...spirit, are trojan horses, as the notions (of history) were historically determined and culturally specific.’ However, his statement appears relevant only in particular political contexts. Srinivas (1998) identifies that *Brahmans* are not the dominant caste in rural India today. ‘Economic, political and ‘western’ axes of power determine dominance. The agriculturally landed and the numerically strong are the dominant social groups today’. Srinivas’ claim that the traditionally determined patterns of caste-specific familial occupation, or *Jajman* are changing, is challenged by those who argue that despite reform, legislation and wider potential for choosing occupation types, ‘a *Brahman* still performs the function of the priest and the *Sudra* remains responsible for ritually polluting occupations. In every region, women and men of specific ‘Untouchable’ castes remain responsible for the essential task of removing pollution of upper and clean castes’ (Dube, 1996). This implies that social positions may have changed for the more and less dominant social groups, but culturally and ritually little has changed for the ‘Untouchables’ or *Sudras* as the social order of *Dharma* persists as both social belief and culture. The ‘Untouchables’ remain ritually polluted, therefore polluting and therefore untouchable. Further, Srinivas’ claim of western influences on the dilution of social hierarchy, though visible, may actually be peripheral. Assayag (1995) reports recent claims in this way, ‘at the office I remove my caste, which I again put on at home’. In the rural context, where offices are rare, such influences may be even less significant.

Spirituality, Ritualism and Social Exclusion through Water in Chuni Village

To observe cultural interpretations of social stratification and the role of water in determining this structure in local contexts, the water behaviour and order in a remote, rural mountain village, Chuni, in the Kumaon hills has been studied and compared with observations made in villages in other parts of North India. The caste groups living in Chuni village and their social hierarchical order is as follows:

Box 1:			
Jati / Social Group	Caste	Occupation	Order in the Social Hierarchy
Khanka	Kshatriya	Traditionally landlords, still agriculturally landed	2 families: traditional landlord family 1 (most dominant), family 2 comprising relatives settled by family 1 (less dominant)
Bishts	Kshatriya	Given land and settled through matrimonial relations with Khanka family 1	Less dominant than family 1 but socially more powerful than family 2
Basnayats	Kshatriya	Given land and settled through matrimonial relations with Khanka family 2	Less dominant than both families of Khankas
Joshis	Brahman	Land tillers settled by Khanka family 1	Low class despite higher caste, this lone Brahman family strives to maintain good relations with the Kshatriya families
Goswamis, Giris	Mixed caste group	Land tillers settled by Khanka family 1	Lower caste, low class, socially unable to exercise power
Airis	Mixed caste group	Settled through illicit marital relations with family 2	Lower caste, low class, socially less powerful than the Goswamis and Giris
Tamtas, Agaris	Sudras or Dalits ⁵	Traditionally blacksmiths and agricultural labourers, settled by Khanka family 1	Lowest caste and class, socially most disadvantaged, this position changes little even for Dalit men holding new professions outside the village confines and their relative economic advancement.

Chuni is known locally as a water-abundant village. The ancient *Jal Devi* (Water Goddess) temple located in the village is said to keep the waters in the traditional irrigation channels, or *guls*, flowing, as well as to bestow other blessings on Chuni residents. The traditional water springs or *Naulas* used by the ‘upper castes’ are also said to be the abode of the *Jal Devi* and are therefore revered and worshipped. The *Naula* is built by constructing a stone wall across a groundwater spring. Throughout mountain villages, ‘*Naulas* are traditionally held in deep reverence and rituals are made while

constructing these systems' (Agarwal and Narain, 1997). Water from the spring is used daily in ritual worship at home and the springs are ritualistically important during marriage, and in local customary and traditional Hindu festivals. In keeping with Vedic philosophy, water as well as the water source itself, is spiritually sacred to the local people and this belief is manifested in the rituals governing social life.

Water is also purifying. The concept of purity exists as a theme, which is central to local life, almost in the same way as defined by Manu. This concept is used to exclude the polluted from water sources, which are considered sacred. In death and birth for the family, and menstruation and childbirth for women, water from the *Naulas* is mixed with water from the holy river Ganga, if available, and is sprinkled on the polluted to purify them before they are re-integrated into the social system and also before they can actually access the *Naulas* themselves. Dalits, here as elsewhere, are considered polluted and capable of polluting. When the upper castes come in close contact with Dalits they are purified by the sprinkling of *Naula* water, a practice known locally as *Chod*. After Dalits leave an upper caste household, the place where they sat in the courtyard is washed or sprinkled with water, or sometimes with a mixture of cow-dung, also identified as pure, and water. The rituals performed in constructing *Naulas*, as mentioned by Agarwal and Narain (1997) were locally explained as purifying the source from the Dalit artisan's polluting touch.

Officially the Kumaon and Garhwal Water Act, 1975, terminated the customary rights of individuals and village communes and according to the Act, the 'State⁶ took over the power...for collection, conservation and distribution of water and control of water sources'. However, in the village, specific hamlets and/or families exercise control over these formally 'state owned' *Naulas* as well as other water sources and determine social inclusion and exclusion in access to water and water sources (Rangan, 1997). Ritually determined local culture excludes the Dalits in Chuni from accessing or using any *Naula*

⁵ Officially the Sudras are known as the Scheduled Castes. Mahatma Gandhi termed the group as 'Harijans' or people of God. Politically, this terminology is strongly rejected by the Scheduled Castes, who prefer to call themselves, Dalits, or the oppressed.

⁶ State in the Indian context refers to an administrative division of government (Agarwal, 1997).

in the village except the one that is assigned as theirs. Ganga Devi, a Tamta woman, tells of an ancient folktale, “A Dalit man in the forest ate some gooseberries from a tree. He then came to a *Naula* belonging to the ‘upper castes’. Very thirsty and seeing no one around, he *stole* and drank some water and found it very sweet (water tastes sweet after eating a gooseberry). He said to himself, No wonder we are not allowed to access such sweet water.” Ganga Devi confirms that this practice continues. Her small nephew was recently beaten for **stealing** cool water on a hot summer day from the *Naula* belonging to the Goswamis. To purify the *Naula*, defiled by the touch of this small Dalit boy, the water was thrown out. The Goswami family performed a ritualistic prayer to the *Jal Devi* and warned the boy’s parents that if the act was repeated the family would be no longer be given land for sharecropping.

Even the spaces around the *Naulas* are considered sacred and therefore to be protected from the polluted. The concept of *Dharma* is exercised as a self-regulatory mechanism to ensure exclusion. Good Dalits and good women are those who do not violate this social doctrine. This is a social belief locally, even amongst women and the Dalits. When the water in the *Naulas* reduces, women are blamed for accessing the spring in an impure condition. Both women and men say, “Big white snakes appear in the *Naulas* as the first sign of the Goddess’ wrath and then the water slowly dries up. The remedy is a purifying *Devi Path* (chant) and also presentation of a calf to the Brahman performing the ritual.” Dalits are not blamed so readily; blaming them would mean legitimising that they can and do access the *Naulas* secretly; which would be politically more damaging. However, when Dalits access *Naulas* forbidden to them, the consequences are graver. In a nearby village, a Dalit schoolteacher, who was not a local, was socially ostracised and finally forced to leave the village. His defiance in fetching drinking water from the *Naula* used by the upper castes was not tolerated, especially as there was an officially provided tap, which villagers identified he could safely use. Taps, in contrast to *Naulas* are not sacred. However, water from taps like these, which are provided through officially implemented projects, carry water mostly from storm water drains, a source that is inferior to the *Naula*. Also, water from the tap is hot in summer and cold in winter, having flowed through exposed metal pipes and not like the *Naula* water, which is cool in summer and

warm in winter, as well as sweet and refreshing. Locally, this defiance was said to be a display of an uncouth attitude, an example of what happens when the Dalits, not having the innate constitution for education, become educated. “It makes them **more** perverse.” Despite legislation that makes such treatment a criminal offence, even educated Dalits like this schoolteacher do not pursue legal prosecution. In the mountain villages, Dalits living as a minority are well aware of what suits their specific interests better.

Hira Devi of Chuni village said, “What can we do? Will you come with me to the *Naula* and I will take out water from the Khanka’s *Naula* in the open (in daylight, in everybody’s knowledge)?” I agreed, although fearing intensely the aftermath of this rebellion, for her and her clan. However, after much thought and discussion, she herself dropped the idea. She said to me, “My neighbours are important to me, no matter what they do. I need their support for my family’s daily existence. You sympathize with me, but you are here today and gone tomorrow.” Conflict and defiance even in the face of social injustice was not the preferred solution for her. It was greatly constraining to question her but to be unable to support her.

Factors of social exclusion for ‘impure’ women vary in intensity between villages. In most mountain villages, women when impure live in small huts outside the domains of the main house. In severely orthodox communities, women are made to live in small settlements outside the village boundary. Exclusion from the *Naulas* is however seen in all villages for ‘impure’ women. This means that women are not able to access water from the *Naulas* especially during periods when they are most in need of water for personal hygiene. During such periods, women do not fetch drinking water or cook food and remain dependent on other members of their family for performing this work, which is essentially theirs at other times. However, they still perform tasks like washing clothes, and fetch water for uses at home which are not considered polluting. For this they have to get water from other water sources, like the storm water drains and rivers. Drains are not considered sacred, and rivers though considered sacred are believed to be capable of absorbing and absolving all pollution because they flow continuously. If such alternative sources are not available, women depend on others for water needed to perform these

tasks as well as for water for personal use. For the Dalits, *Naulas* except their own are permanently inaccessible and for the Dalit women, when doubly impure, their own springs are also inaccessible.

Can Dalits not be satisfied using the *Naulas* assigned to them? Why this complaint of inequality? The social geography of the mountain villages shows that historically dominant land-owning groups have occupied water abundant sites in the village setting. The degrees of social hierarchy as detailed in Box 1 closely parallel the relative access to preferred sources of water and water adequacy in Chuni. Dalits and the other service providers were settled in the least attractive peripheries of the village.

This explains why some upper caste women in some parts of Chuni could say, “We are water lords (sic) here”, while Dalit women in the same village said, “Ask us what water scarcity is? It is not to bathe in the summer heat after toiling in the fields. It is to reuse water used in cooking for washing utensils, to use this water again for washing clothes and finally to feed the soapy water to buffaloes. It is to sit up the whole night filling water glass by glass as it trickles into our *Naula*. It is to wait for someone from the Khanka household to give us water from their *Naula*. It is to walk up and down their path, calling a little, waiting a little, hearing them say they are too busy and helplessly remembering our own tasks at home. It is to *steal* water stealthily, taking care not to spill water on the concrete floor for fear of being suspected, of feeling the guilt of stealing. It is all this and much more, of being obliged physically, socially and morally for the water they give us from their *Naula*.”

The 8 Dalit families in this hamlet have access to one *Naula*, in comparison to one Khanka family’s sole *legitimate* access to one *Naula*. Even when numerically equal, inequality persists on the basis of untouchability.

In a nearby village, Roulighet, Deepa Devi, a Dalit woman lives alone at the top of the hill with her two young children. She and her children use water from a tank that is fed by water from a drain. They *share* this tank with another Brahman family. In the monsoon the water flows out from the pipe, situated high up in the tank. As long as Deepa Devi does not touch the tank, she can use this water, even though she is a Dalit

and even during her menstruation, as the tank is not considered to be sacred. In the summer the water from the drain decreases to a trickle and needs to be scooped out of the tank. Then, Deepa Devi needs to wait for the Brahman woman or the men in her family (when she is also impure) to use the water first and then give some to her. She and her children cannot themselves access the water inside the tank. Most days there is not enough water for two families and Deepa Devi, second in hierarchy and priority, needs to walk down to the river located a kilometre away from her house, across a steep slope. This is an enormous demand on her work, energy and time.

In remote mountain villages, traditional sources like the *Naula* remain widely used. Officially provided water supply systems have either not reached remote rural villages or, where provided are unreliable, poorly maintained, not the preferred source of drinking water and also identified as inappropriate for the multiple household needs of water. The officially provided system of tap-stands in Chuni village built as a ‘nine lakh rupees project’ (900,000 Rupees) provided water for only 4 days. A big monsoon landslide washed away the pipes. This project design had anyway excluded the Dalit hamlets. It was commonly said, “Those hamlets are uphill, the technology of gravity flow cannot make water flow uphill”. This happened even though official policy recognising caste-based inequities defines, ‘Priority coverage to Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe inhabitants and SC/ST inhabited villages.’ This policy was drawn up after identifying that, ‘One of the most obnoxious disabilities suffered by the rural Dalits is the lack of access to drinking water. Loopholes in the law are exploited by higher caste villagers, with the connivance of local officials of identical castes, to classify village wells as private property. The Harijans either have to travel far to get their water or must turn to polluted sources that the higher castes do not use’ (The Commissioner for Scheduled Castes, 1980 quoted by Agarwal et. al., 1981).

Despite the legislation of this policy the practice of connivance continues. When discussing the problems faced by the Dalits in Chuni with the Junior Engineer of the official organisation, he said, “But the elected head has never raised this complaint.” The elected village head is not a Dalit and the Junior Engineer himself has not traveled to the

village. In a similar incident in a rural village in coastal Orissa, it was seen that the Dalits continue to use water from a polluted pond, (also used by animals) as the official norm of one hand-pump per 250 persons means that hand-pumps, though provided, are not conveniently located. In this mixed-caste village, the Dalits could not access the handpumps used by their Brahman neighbours. In some places, handpumps are shared between castes, but the access is still unequal. In water scarce Banda district of Uttar Pradesh, both Dalits and the Kurmis (a socially lower caste, but not Dalits) used the same handpump. To purify the source and water, 'Kurmi women clean the handpump with several buckets of water before filling their own bucket if the earlier user was a Dalit. ...If the other castes are filling water or using the handpump, the Dalits need to wait for hours. They cannot fill water together and the Dalits must always wait for their turn'⁷

In the Kumaon hills, the Dalits are a numerical minority. This fact, coupled with their occupational need to spread out as service providers across villages, means that they have historically remained numerically vulnerable and thus unable to achieve any authority locally, despite supporting legislation. Other principles of lower social status also influence the fact that the Dalits remain excluded from authorities that make decisions about water at the village level. Similarly, women, barred by social norms of exclusion from public domains, have historically remained excluded from any decision-making authorities. This explains why the design of water systems has historically not met the specific needs of Dalits specifically and women generally.

Community Management in Water Projects

What happens when the concept of community ownership is transferred to such local settings? The World Bank supported SWAJAL project specifies the need for handing over management responsibility to the local community, through the Village Water and Sanitation Committee (VWSC). There is a specified criterion that thirty per cent of VWSC memberships should be reserved for women and twenty per cent for Dalits.

⁷ (Dialogue, 1994).

Dinesh Ram and Hari Ram are the two Dalit representatives in the VWSC in Nagir village, which is also dominated by Kshatriyas. They say, “Our selection, though a step-forward in our long history of subjugation, is essentially mandatory. We were selected because it was specified. The representation is not effective; when we cannot sit and drink tea and smoke together, how can we plan together?” They said this in connection with a VWSC meeting held on the day of this interview at the headman’s house, on the occasion of his grandson’s naming ceremony. The Dalits were conspicuous by their absence at the gathering on this auspicious occasion. Dinesh Ram and Hari Ram did not hold any specific portfolio in the committee. Asking if they would like to see themselves in the post of the committee Chairman, a position held currently by a Kshatriya man, made them uncomfortable. Living in a political minority and social subjugation, they fear the consequences of such bold measures.

The World Bank project also came to Roulikhet village and brought with it benefits of non-formal education, income generation programmes and hygiene education together with improved access to drinking water and sanitation.

Deepa Devi, identified above, did not attend any of the project’s activities and trainings. She says she was not aware that these sessions were taking place. The upper caste women in the main hamlet say, “We called her but she did not come.” Even if called, Deepa Devi as a single householder with two young children would have had little time to attend these sessions. But, much more importantly, Deepa Devi’s touch and mere presence are considered socially polluting. Would the upper caste women who abide by the social norms of purity and pollution, invite her for stitching and literacy sessions in small closely packed rooms, or sit on the same mat with her in the open? It is another matter that this village, heralded as the success story of the project, **excluded** Deepa Devi’s household from the improved water supply scheme and the subsidised sanitation specially determined for the Dalits. Various theories of connivance are quoted locally to explain why the family could not be **included**.

In terms of women’s increased access to water, the upper caste women in Roulikhet village do not use the tap-stands provided by the project when they are bodily impure.

They continue to go to the river or ask others for water. The belief here is that, although the taps are not sacred, using the water flowing rapidly from the taps would result in the water flowing out to the village lowlands, where the temple of the powerful village Goddess is located. Water polluted by the touch of such women would pollute the sacred spot and this would result in the Goddess's wrath, which few women in the village dare incite. During these periods, women use water sparingly so that it is *absorbed* in the soil and does not flow down to the temple.

Conclusion

The age-old Hindu philosophy of water and the human body being social constructs persists. The notions of this belief have changed with history but there is no evidence that these changes have resulted in positive outcomes for the socially deprived. Social inequality, instituted in the later Vedic periods on the basis of caste ascribed by birth and gender, persists and thrives in contemporary Hindu society and the losers in this unequal social order are the Dalits and women.

In the rural mountain villages, the social order remains unequal and behaviour in relation to water remains instrumental in determining inequality. Consequently the Dalits remain permanently excluded and women are cyclically excluded from traditional, but currently preferred and used systems of water delivery. This observation may vary in specific villages, however given the constancy of ritual purity and pollution and the role of water in defining these, one can safely assume that the situation is largely universal, especially in those areas where the Dalits remain a minority.

Official policy aimed to improve access to water for the Dalits, who were identified as those who had historically been excluded from traditional water sources. However, inequity in social order at local levels, coupled with the inadequacy of official interventions, has determined that Dalits continue to lack access to reliable, appropriate and adequate water sources.

New policies identify the failure of official interventions and aim to improve access to water by restoring authority to village communities. In order to socially empower women and the Dalits and to improve their access to water, such policies aim to include the formerly excluded in decision-making forums at the village level. However, policy does not identify the root causes of the principles of social exclusion operating at local levels. When authority is handed over to local communities, local power positions determine that power remains concentrated in the hands of the socially dominant. It is in this context that Murray's (1994) argument of the need to distinguish political, economic and status mobility becomes relevant. He identifies that political and economic mobility of the Dalits has occurred in India, more in the urban context than in rural areas, but little change can be seen in the ritual status of the Dalits. 'To raise the status of some is to lower the status of others; to decrease the impurity of Untouchables has the long-term consequence of eroding the Brahman's extraordinary purity' (Dumont, 1980 quoted by Murray, 1994). Addressing structural social inequities and the resulting unequal access to basic resources challenges the very notions central to the Hindu way of life. Increasing political mobility for the Dalits and women will not always readily translate to mobility in status. Such deep-rooted caste and gender inequities cannot be erased simply. To equitably improve access to water for the Dalits and women, the root causes of the determinants of social inequity need to be identified, exposed and addressed locally. Blueprint approaches construed in ignorance of deep-rooted cultural values of caste and gender hierarchies will at best result in cosmetic, but not real changes to the social fabric of Hindu society and the power-based distribution and access to basic resources in such societies.

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