

# Dalit Women and Water

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## Abstract

The term Dalit means, “crushed” or “broken” and has come to represent those groups which have been traditionally considered to be outside the caste fold. Based on interviews with five Dalit women in a hamlet in Mahabubnagar district of Andhra Pradesh (now Telangana), India, this paper highlights Dalit women’s experiences related to water use, collection and access that are often shaped by their caste and gender positions. The study is qualitative in nature and employs a phenomenological approach with interviews as the data-collection method. Water is scarce in this community and fetching water often takes place at privately owned wells where discrimination based on caste and gender can incite violence. The lack of public (i.e. state supported) water supply and infrastructure further marginalizes Dalits as they have to depend on privately owned water sources, which are owned by individuals from influential caste groups. This dependency of Dalits to draw water from sources owned by upper caste individuals creates space for discrimination against Dalits while reinforcing caste structures. Experiences of violence and discrimination while collecting water are documented here as is the effort of women in community to organize and create better access to water.

**Keywords:** Dalit, women, water, access, collection, gender, groundwater, caste based discrimination, private wells

## Acknowledgement

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## Introduction

The term Dalit<sup>2</sup> means “crushed” or “broken” (Rao 2010; Massey 1995) and has come to represent those groups which have been traditionally considered to be outside the caste fold, which comprises of Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya caste groups. Guarded by religious and cultural conceptions of purity and pollution, social interactions deprived Dalits of dignity, respect and access to resources. Dalits have been referred to by many terms such as untouchables, exterior castes<sup>3</sup>, harijan<sup>4</sup>, chandala<sup>5</sup> or depressed classes<sup>6</sup>; however, the Indian state categorizes the different Dalit caste groups under a Scheduled Caste list, and thus Dalits are also referred to as Scheduled Castes<sup>7</sup>. The state has put in place political safeguards to secure the human rights of Scheduled Castes groups. Nonetheless, these political safeguards have not ensured the end of caste based discrimination and Dalits in India continue to face discrimination (Omvedt, 1994; Thorat, 2002; Michael, 2007).

Amita Baviskar (2007) notes that, ‘struggles over water are simultaneously struggles for power over symbolic representations and material resources’ (Baviskar, 2007). Studies have shown that Dalits’ access to water is marked by their caste status (Tiwary and Phansalkar, 2007; Jodhka, 2002; Prakash and Sama, 2006; Ghose, 2003). Literature suggests that Dalits often find it difficult to access water due to their disadvantaged position in the caste hierarchy.

Tiwary and Phansalkar (2007) observe that

2 The word Dalit was revived by the Dalit Panthers in their 1973 manifesto, as a marker of claiming their history of oppression.

3 The term exterior castes was used by J.H. Hutton in 1963

4 The term harijan was used by M.K. Gandhi and translates to mean “children of god”.

5 Manusmriti, ancient Indian code book for Hindus, uses the word Chandala.

6 The term, ‘depressed classes’ was used by British officials.

7 The term, ‘scheduled castes’ appeared for the first time in April 1935, when the British government issued the Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1936, specifying certain castes, races, tribes as Scheduled Castes. (Michael 2007, 16)

Dalits, as a social and economic category, are more vulnerable to water scarcity conditions as they usually depend upon common water sources, which are less reliable, thus increasing their vulnerability to unavailability of water during dry periods. Further, population growth, climate change and increased extraction of groundwater have contributed towards the scarcity of water. Similarly, Anjal Prakash and R.K. Sama (2006) observe that the conditions of water scarcity have been aggravated due to persisting differences in power relations between castes which allow privileges for higher castes over Dalit castes. Sukhdeo Thorat (2002), writing on atrocities against Dalits, refers to a Report of the Commission of the Schedules Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which highlights that “access to water” was a major reason for violence/atrocities against Dalits (Thorat, 2002).

Viewing water from a lens of intersecting social realities, we see that access to water is inevitably bound by power structures arising from caste, class, location and gender. Kulkarni, Joy and Paranjpe (2008) note that social taboos prevent Dalit women from accessing drinking water, highlighting that unequal access to water acutely affects Dalit women. Most gender based domestic roles carried out by women, such as cooking, washing, cleaning, and fetching water, require that women have access to water, yet the concerns of women as water users have often been neglected in the development of water sources and infrastructure (Lahiri-Dutt, 2006; Ahmed, 2005; Kulkarni, Joy and Paranjpe, 2008). Ahmed (2005) argues that, “while women play an important role in household water and food security, overlooking the diverse material relationships that women have with water – mediated by class, caste, age and gender – can be problematic”. Thus, social contexts need to be taken into account while trying to understand issues related to water.

Water is essential to life. Water is also a highly volatile issue where power and politics often play out. The United Nations states that access to water is a basic human right. Dalit initiatives aimed at ending exploitation include gaining access to water. In most households, women are

responsible for providing for the water needs of the family due to gender role expectations. Accordingly, understanding the lives of Dalit women as water users is an important part of understanding the intersectional aspects of water, access, use, and their connections to social hierarchies. Sociologists have noted that “Dalit women talk differently” (Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998), asserting that the voices, life experiences, perceptions and thoughts of Dalit women are different from those of non-Dalit women and Dalit and non-Dalit men. Therefore, it is logical to assume that Dalit women experience water differently. The objective of this study is to understand the experience of Dalit women as water users.

## **Methods**

### *Study Design*

The questions that guided the framing of the research design for understanding the experiences of Dalit women with regard to water included: How is women’s use of water related to their gender roles? How is women’s access to water related to their caste status? What are the experiences of Dalit women as users of water? A qualitative research method was best suited for this study as life experiences can be taken into account in developing an understanding of the issues being studied. The intent of the study was not to build on theory, but to describe the experience of Dalit women with regard to water use and access. Therefore, a phenomenological approach to qualitative research was used, as it enables one to “see reality through another person’s eyes” (Bernard, 2013). Using phenomenological methodology allows one to see reality and capture a small slice of it, according to the lens of those who live it. It allows the researcher to learn about phenomenon through the lived experiences of the people experiencing it. During the process of data collection, participants were encouraged to give a full description of their experiences related to access and use of water. An interview guide provided questions that guided the process of data collection, wherein the participants were asked to describe in detail their experiences. The

process of analysis sought to derive meaning by relying on the data to identify emerging themes. This study is cross-sectional as it is based on data collected at one place at one point in time.

### *Research Site*

The Gram Panchayat of Mamidipally is located in Kothur Mandal, Mahabubnagar District of Andhra Pradesh<sup>8</sup>. Of the six hamlets in Mamidipally, Maseed Mamidipally was selected as the hamlet to conduct the study as it has a demographically diverse population comprising of Muslim and Hindu households as well as different caste groups such as Other Backward Classes<sup>9</sup>, Brahmins<sup>10</sup>, Middle order castes<sup>11</sup> and Dalits. Mahabubnagar district is a part of the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, which, faces water scarcity problems and is drought prone (Ilaiah, 1986; Simhadri, 1997).

### *Subject Population*

Maseed Mamidipally has a total population of 705 people, of which 349 are female and 356 are male. Maseed Mamidipally has a total of 157 households, out of which 33 households belong to the individuals belonging to the Scheduled Castes (Cyriac, 2011), i.e. around 21 percent of the total households in the hamlet belong to Dalits.

### *Socio-demographic profile of sample*

The participants of this study are Dalit women. All the participants are married and moved to the hamlet after marriage. The participants belong to the Madiga and Mala caste groups, both of which are Dalit castes. Both these castes are listed as scheduled castes. The hamlet of Maseed Mamidipally has a total of 33 Dalit

<sup>8</sup> At the time of data collection and writing the research site was in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Since then, Andhra Pradesh has been divided into two states, and the research site now will be a part of the state of Telangana.

<sup>9</sup> The Other Backward Classes is a term classified by the Government of India to recognize castes or communities, which are socially and economically backward.

<sup>10</sup> Brahmins are a caste groups who are considered to be the highest in the Caste hierarchy.

<sup>11</sup> Vaishya and Kshatriya caste groups are known as the middle order castes as they are lower to the Brahmins but above Shudra [Dalits] in the caste hierarchy.

families. Five women were interviewed for the purpose of this study. Three of the women interviewed were in their 30's, one was in her 40's and one was approximately 70 years old<sup>12</sup>.

### *Sampling Method*

Snowball sampling was used in selecting the research participants. Snowball sampling is a sampling technique where "one research contact leads to another, and so on" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). The researcher was new to the village and finding the participants for the study was a bit difficult since the only contact person of the village the researcher was familiar with was the woman who cooked food for the researcher. The cook was informed about the nature of the study and the desired subject population. She introduced the research team to the first participant. After initial contact with the first participant, the research team was introduced to the next participant, who introduced three other participants. This is called snowball sampling.

### *Data Collection and Data Analysis Methodology*

Interviewing was selected as a method of data collection as it provides a personal account of a person's life experiences in their own voice.

**"As a method of inquiry, interviewing is most consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language. It affirms the importance of the individual without denigrating the possibility of community and collaboration"** (Seidman, 1991).

Interviewing as a method of inquiry aids the researcher's understanding of the experiences of Dalit women and the meaning they make out of their experience. An interview guide was used as a tool for data collection. The questions in the interview guide were framed according to the research objectives and corresponded with the questions this study sought to understand. The questions were translated into Telugu, a

<sup>12</sup> The exact age of the participants could not be recorded, as they did not know their specific age. Age was deduced by calculating the age of their children or age at the time of marriage and counting the years, which have happened since then.

regional language<sup>13</sup>. The interview guide was an apt tool for data collection as it allowed the participants to respond freely and speak about their opinions and experiences, which was necessary for this study, and included a range of questions regarding the use of water, sources of water, ownership of water, women's work and water, impact of caste on access and use of water, and state intervention. This allowed for the researcher to document experiences of the participant in an elaborate form, which was important for this study. The interviews were conducted at the residences of the participants and audio recorded after oral consent was taken. As the researcher could not speak Telugu, a research facilitator acted as a translator. The duration of the interviews was between 25 minutes and 70 minutes. The tapes were translated and transcribed into English for data analysis.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The participant responses were categorized according to themes. The interview transcripts were read and re-read. Coding was done manually, by identifying an important passage, idea, or experience, which the research participant shared. Quotes, which appeared to contain similar content were given the same code and each code was analyzed to make meaning of the text. Clusters of themes emerging from the codes were identified.

### *Issues of Validity*

"Validity refers to the accuracy and trustworthiness of instruments, data and findings in research" (Bernard, 2013). This study was based on a phenomenological methodology and uses thematic analysis to analyze the data, which was collected. The interviews were audio recorded. The audiotapes were transcribed. The transcripts were manually read, coded and emerging themes were identified. The study tried to bring to the fore the everyday experiences of Dalit women and their access to water. "The participants' reflections, conveyed in their own words, strengthen the face validity and credibility of the research" (Patton, 2002).

The themes were supported by quotes taken from the transcripts, the analysis draw directly from the words of the research participants.

### *Ethical Procedures*

This study dealt with experiences of women, some of which surrounded physical and psychological violence perpetrated upon them by upper caste people. As the interviews were sensitive in nature, it was decided that the identities of the participants would be kept confidential. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and outlined participant's role. Participants gave oral consent, as the people of Mamidipally were skeptical of signing on paper. The participants were told about the topic and type of questions, and informed that they could withdraw consent or refuse to answer any questions they were uncomfortable answering. The participants were assured of their confidentiality and that of the data collected. They were informed that the audio files would be deleted after the data had been analyzed, and that the names of the participants would be changed in the article to maintain confidentiality.

### **Strengths and limitations**

Working with water is a part of the everyday experiences of Dalit women, as are the difficulties and hardships associated with gathering water. Guru (1995) and Rege (1998) argue that the experiences of Dalit women are different from that of men and non-Dalit women. This study documents the experiences of Dalit women as water users, a subgroup that has not been studied before. Issues of access to water in terms of adequate supply, timely provision, and publicly owned water sources, caste based discrimination, gender based violence, women's agency, and community mobilization were analyzed and the results collected.

The sample size was small, restricted to five interviews. All the participants belonged to the same hamlet and caste category; thus a comparison between experiences of non-Dalit and Dalit women was not covered. Nonetheless,

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix 1 for the interview guide.



this study can be viewed as a starting point for further investigation into the lived experiences of Dalit women as users of water.

## Results

Similarities and differences in experiences of the participants were identified based on emergent themes from the data collected. Observations from the field were also used to analyze the data. There are six themes: (1) water access, collection and use of water, (2) sources of water, (3) private sources of water and hierarchical access, (4) water, work and women, (5) caste and water, and (6) an incident of violence and community mobilization.

### *Access, collection and use of water*

All the Dalit women interviewed said that they needed water for washing dishes and clothes, cleaning the house, cooking, bathing, drinking, agriculture, performing religious rituals and the construction of buildings. However, while describing water related activities, all participants gave prominence to the household requirements for water. The participants realized the gendered nuances of access to water. One participant said, “We face more problems than men, as we have to take care of everything at home”.

The participants spoke of the link between women’s roles and access to water. In response to the question “who is the person who went to fetch water for the house?” the participants had a range of answers. Each household functioned differently and different members took the responsibility to fetch water.

Pavanamma (30’s<sup>14</sup>), a participant in this study said that, “from my house, my daughter, son, and I go to collect water. My husband doesn’t go.” Another participant, Padma (70’s), said, “My daughters-in-law go to fetch water. Meenaxi (40’s) said, “I go to fetch water. I do not allow my daughter and husband to go to fetch water. This is because the landowners verbally abuse

us. Those words are very harsh and difficult to bear.” Lathamma (30’s) said, “I and my husband go to fetch water. Sometimes my daughter helps in fetching water. I carry the pots myself and my husband carries the water on a cycle.”

While both women and men fetched water, it was generally women bearing the primary responsibility for the job. The task was also age specific; older people did not go to fetch water. In none of the interviews did the participant say that only the men of the house went to fetch water. The decision as to which member of the household would fetch water was a very conscious decision taken by the family.

### *Sources of water*

The village is solely dependent on groundwater, which is extracted via borewells. At the time of the study, there were two main sources of water in Maseed Mamidipally. One is a public (i.e. government supported) water source, which is the borewell that is connected to the overhead water tank that supplies water to individual homes, while the other borewells in the village are owned by certain individual land-holders, who generally belong to the non-Dalit groups and are financially well off.

The government constructed the overhead water tank in order to provide water to the village. Water is pumped to the tank from a borewell that was also constructed by the government. The hamlet of Maseed Mamidipally is divided into colonies based on caste affiliations. The overhead water tank is located at the crossroad where the Dalit colony ends and non-Dalit caste colonies begin. From this tank, water is distributed through pipes to each household in Maseed Mamidipally. The village manages the maintenance and daily operation of the government borewell and tank. The water from the overhead tank is solely for domestic use.

Padma, who is in her 70’s, shared a story of water scarcity problems prior to the building of the water tank. She remembers, “When I got married (approximately 55 years prior to the study), there used to be caste specific wells. We

<sup>14</sup> Numbers in the bracket next to the participants’ names indicates the approximate age of the participant.



Figure 1: An open well, which is now used to discard rubbish (Source: Author)



Figure 2: Out of use handpump (Source: Author)

would fetch water from those wells. After a while the wells dried and we started using water from borewells. We used to fetch water from the normal wells, carry pots back... there were handpumps but these too dried up." Pavanamma (30's) reminisces, "There was a pond where we would go to wash clothes and bathe. But someone broke the wall of that pond. All the water flowed out. When someone in the family dies, we [the family] need to dip in water, but that is not possible anymore". She also said that, "there used to be a spring of water near the Yellama temple in Reddy's field, but that has also dried up". The participants explained that the sources of water in the village have been depleted. Open wells, hand pumps, ponds, and other surface waters have disappeared from the village as groundwater levels have dipped over the years due to the increased extraction of use of groundwater for agriculture.

The absence of open water sources has led to changes in the way water is used, as there are no open surface common water ponds for activities such as washing clothes or performing rituals. All the participants have piped water connections in their homes, which are connected to the overhead tank in the village. Meenaxi gladly expressed that, "after the installation of a water tank and taps, the work load has reduced. Earlier we had to fetch water from a neighboring hamlet."

While the piped water supply had reduced the work of fetching water, the water supplied via the pipeline was inadequate and the participants needed to fetch water at private borewells. Yadamma (25-30 years) stated, "I get tap water of about five cans [1 can of water = 15 liters of water]. We are five people at home and that water is not enough for all purposes. Therefore, we go fetch water at [privately owned] borewells". Meenaxi added, "when less water is released, when water does not come, we have to go to the [private] borewell to fetch water".

Meenaxi shared her experience of fetching water, "we get only four cans of water from the borewells and the pump owners do not allow us to take more. If we take more, the owners will snatch the cans and throw the water. Today, I went to take water from the borewell. I took two cans, but when I went to take more they didn't allow." Thus, access to water depends on the will of the person who owns the borewell. The participants have to live with the vulnerability that comes with the uncertainty of acquiring water on a daily basis.

Most participants mentioned that they are verbally abused when they go to fetch water. When asked what they do about this, Pavanamma said, "As we are in need of water, we cannot show 'julum' [aggression/dominance]. So we accept our mistake. Even if they say things, we don't reply." The need for water is so grave that the participant decided to bear with verbal abuse to get access to water. However, Meenaxi differed from her. She said, "the landowners shout at us, those words are difficult to bear. We can go without a bath but not with these words." Lathamma stated, "If we go there [privately





Figure 3: Water tank (Source: Author)

owned borewell] to fetch water, they take the water cans and throw the water into the fields. Since it is a private borewell, we cannot force them to give us water.” Individuals react to the verbal abuse differently. They do feel that it is harsh, but there is a sense of helplessness attached to this, as they need water. As women, the participants experienced harassment due to their gender. Yamma said, “Men sit near borewells without clothes so that women cannot come and take water. Men bathe there. We cannot go take water.”

The interviews solidified the notion that women as users and fetchers of water are vulnerable to the threat of insults, sexual harassment, and ultimately, may be denied water. Women as a group have decided to bear the abuse to get access to water, but are conscious of the difficulty and unfairness of the situation that allows for the belittling of a human being because of caste, class and gender.

### *Private sources of water and hierarchical access*

Due to an inadequate household water supply the research participants were dependent on private borewells to fulfill their water requirements. Expressing her dissatisfaction with the system of water supply, Yamma said, “Though there is an overhead tank, there isn’t proper water supply. If these [private] borewells were not there, it would have been a big problem to get water for the village.” A few of the more financially secure individual landowners in the village have dug these private borewells. Padma mentioned that, “well off families put borewells in their fields. We use the water from their borewells.” The research participants said that there were five borewells in the village. Of the borewells from which they fetched water the most, one belonged to a Muslim, one was owned by a person from the OBC (other backward classes) caste, two belonged to people from Kuruva Caste and one was owned by a Reddy<sup>15</sup>. None of the private borewells owners belonged to a Dalit group.

The people who owned the borewells did not encourage others to fetch water from these private sources. Lamma said, “If we go there [to the privately owned borewell] to fetch water, we are scolded. The owners say that

Figure 4: Household water tap (Source: Author)



<sup>15</sup> Reddy is a dominant caste group

they will not get enough water for their fields. They say this isn't a government borewell, that we can come and take as much water as we want." Padma said, "When we go with our pots, the farmer who owns the borewell will say that, the water is not enough for my fields, how can you take water? Most of the time, the private borewell owners verbally abuse us. And they say that since they own this borewell, we have no reason to take the water."

The participants did perceive the owners of the private borewells as the owners of the water. Their access to water depended on the will of the owners of the borewell. Pavanamma says, "When we go there, again, they do not allow us to get water as it is a private borewell. If it was a government borewell, we could question them."

The research participants also attributed water shortage in the hamlet to the increase in the number of private borewells. Padma remembers, "after the water tank was constructed, we used to get good water supply. But people who had fields near the water tank also put in borewells in their fields. Because of this the level of water in this borewell decreased, and the water supply reduced." Another participant, Meenaxi, reiterated the same sentiment saying, "those who owned land around the public borewell installed borewells on their land as it had a lot of water. These borewells are deeper than the government borewell and pull out all the water. Because of this the government borewell now has less water."

The interviews reflect that for Dalit women, access to water is connected to hierarchical power relations, which are based on their position in society. In addition to caste, class is a significant factor in accessing water as those who own land and have resources to install borewells control the water in the village. Further, the lack of initiatives to rejuvenate groundwater, increased extraction of groundwater by private parties and the meager state sponsored initiatives for water supply makes Dalit women's ability to access water all the more onerous.

### *Water, work and women*

Domestic activities such as cooking, washing, cleaning and fetching water are often assigned to women. It is women's responsibility to meet the water needs of the family. Water use and access is therefore directly related to women's work and labor in the household. In the village of Maseed Mamidipally, the construction of the overhead water tank made piped water available in every house. This infrastructural development affected the way the village used, accessed, and perceived water.

The research participants asserted that the overhead tank has benefitted them. Pavanamma said, "after constructing the overhead tank our work has reduced. Earlier we would draw water from the well, and our hands would hurt. Now we pay 10 [ca. \$ 0.16] every month towards the maintenance of the tank." Meenaxi said, "For the past ten years we haven't had a lot of water problems. After the construction of the overhead tank our work has reduced." Yadamma elaborated on the manner in which household water taps impacted her life; she said, "After the taps were put, there were changes in the way we did household work. I can keep rice on the stove and fill water in the bucket. And after that I can cook. Then I get ready and go to work."

Nonetheless, the benefits of the tap water connection in each home have been limited to the water supply. Lathamma mentioned, "After the building of the tank, labor and workload has reduced as each house has a tap connection. But whenever we do not get water from the overhead tank we have problems. If we get tap water we can complete our work fast and go to work". Participants agreed that the overhead tank reduced their workload of fetching water. However, as the supply of water was erratic, irregular, inadequate and uncertain they now experience difficulties in meeting their water needs.

### *Caste and water*

Interviews reflected the impact that caste can have on access to water. The experiences related



by the participants highlight that caste status marks a person's access to water.

Padma shared the following, "when we go to fetch water from the [privately owned] borewell, we can take water after the upper castes have fetched water. We have to stand away from the water outlet while filling our pots. Our water pot should not touch that of the upper castes." Pavanamma said, "All caste groups come to fetch water at the private borewell. There is caste discrimination. They [upper castes] say things like 'why are you people touching us, why is your bucket touching our bucket?' It is a little less now, earlier this would happen a lot. They [upper castes] remain in their limit and we remain in ours, because we do not want to hear swear words from them. Because of that, we stand a little far away from them when we go to fetch water." The experiences of Padma and Pavanamma show us that "untouchability"<sup>16</sup> was still practiced in this village, which leads to further alienation of Dalits from access to water. Notions of purity and pollution ingrained in religion and caste-based dogma form the basis for the practice of "untouchability". Because of this, those belonging to upper castes do not want to share common water sources with Dalits and actions such as the touching of pots or physical proximity between the non-Dalit (upper) and Dalit castes could lead to verbal violence. While non-Dalits also have to seek permission from owners of private borewells, Dalits experience caste based discrimination and marginalization.

Lathamma reflected, "I never go to the upper caste area to fetch water. When we go to the private borewell to collect water, we have to move aside when the upper caste people come to collect water. First the upper castes collect water, after that we do." Thus, it was seen that the entire village experiences shortage of water, but Dalits have to experience the added stigma and differential treatment in accessing water. Lathamma further mentioned that, "earlier there was a lot of caste discrimination, now it

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<sup>16</sup> 'Untouchability' is a term that is used to describe practices of discrimination experienced by Dalits, wherein upper castes perceive the presence of Dalits as polluting; Dalits are not allowed to enter temples, interact with those of upper castes or use the same water sources.

has reduced. But we still cannot enter the house of an upper caste person." While caste based discrimination has reduced, Dalits continue to experience differential access to water.

Yadamma, in contrast, claimed that she did not experience discrimination based on caste while seeking access to water. She said, "so now, when we go to get water from borewells, people do not discriminate based on caste. But if we enter the house of an upper caste person they will differentiate."

Meenaxi describes how awareness about caste-based discrimination has developed. She said, "Caste discrimination has been lesser in the village. Earlier it was a lot, but now it is minimal. But for the last six to seven years, people have got education and question inequalities. So, nobody will practice discrimination as it may lead to conflict. If you look at any other forms of discrimination... if the upper castes say anything like 'you are a Mala-Madiga' our children will go and confront them."

The interviews suggested that the village still practices caste-based discrimination, though the intensity has reduced. All participants except one<sup>17</sup> highlighted that Dalit women experience caste-based discrimination when they go to fetch water. They have to stand aside, not let their water pots touch those of the upper caste, and have to fill the water pots from a little distance. However, the intensity of caste-based discrimination has reduced and there is a growing critical consciousness about standing up against caste-based abuse. Nonetheless, the experiences of these women with regards to access to water have been marked by their caste status.

### *An incident of violence and community mobilization*

Pavanamma narrated an incident of violence against her daughter when she had gone to fetch water. Here is what she had to say.

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<sup>17</sup> She does not experience discrimination since her husband works as the maintenance man of the overhead tank and receives a monthly allowance.

**“When my daughter was ten years old, I asked her to get water from Golla’s field [private borewell owner]. When she went there, he [the owner] beat her with a stick. She was injured. Those who were there when this happened scolded him saying, ‘why did you beat the child? If you didn’t want to give water you shouldn’t have. But why did you beat the child?’ I then took my child and went to the ward members’ houses. I even went to Reddy [an influential person in the village]. Reddy asked the women to come together and suggested that we should go to the Mandal<sup>18</sup> and district office and complain. After a few days all the women together went in tractors to make a complaint for water issues. Then the government sanctioned the installation of a borewell.”**

This incident mobilized the community to ask the government to provide them with water. It was the mobilization around this that led to the sanctioning of a government borewell and the building of the overhead water tank.

Some of the research participants stressed the role played by political parties in the process of building the water tank. Meenaxi narrated, “There are many parties like the TDP [Telugu Desham Party] and Congress. The women of TDP went in trucks and tractors and demanded [that] the Mandal [administrative block] officials provide water. Women from the Congress Party didn’t go, but after the borewell was set up everyone has benefitted with water.” Even though water was an issue that concerned all women in the village, women were divided based on political party affiliations. Those who were associated with the Congress Party did not participate as the TDP took initiative in the collective campaign to secure water. The availability of water benefitted everyone, however, it created resentment towards those who did not participate in the campaign.

Whatever the reason behind the mobilization of

the village residents to compel the government to provide the village with water, the village has been able to stand together and demand their water rights. More noteworthy is the fact that the women have played a key role in collectively demanding the development of water infrastructure in the hamlet.

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

This study highlighted that access to better water supply was one of the most crucial problems that the village faced. Dalit women experienced access to water colored by their caste, class and gender realities. While Dalit women viewed a lack of government initiatives to provide a water supply as the main reason for their lack of access to water, as opposed to caste discrimination, they do understand their own gendered realities and recognize caste as a barrier in gaining access to water.

The village studied here is solely dependent on groundwater. There is only one public (i.e. government supported) water source, which is the borewell that is connected to the overhead water tank that supplies water to individual homes. The other borewells in the village are owned by certain individual, non-Dalit landholders, who generally belong to the upper castes and are financially well off. The provision of the overhead tank and household water connections has reduced the drudgery of women with respect to fetching water. However, inadequate water supply through government initiatives has meant that the women have to go to fetch water from borewells owned by private landowners.

The research findings indicate that the responsibility of fetching water often lies with women, though other members of the family may also fetch water. The role of fetching water is age specific and older women tend to not go to fetch water. Household gender based division of labor establishes that women perform tasks which require the use of water, and the participants have articulated that water supply related problems are women’s problems. The findings also indicate that while collecting water

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<sup>18</sup> A Mandal is a block within the district.

Dalit women experience verbal abuse and at times physical abuse and have to deal with the uncertainty of being denied water at any point. Caste-based discriminations make the task of fetching water tougher for Dalit women, as they have to ensure that they do not get in the way of upper caste people while fetching water. Access to water for Dalit women is therefore marked by existing hierarchical power relations. Caste-based discrimination manifests itself through modes that promote unequal access to water. The differential access to water for Dalits is linked to their lack of social and material privilege, which does not allow them to own land, or own private borewells, increasing their dependence on private borewells, which are often owned by upper caste individuals. The participants draw linkages between their caste and the way in which they have to behave while fetching water. While caste-based discrimination related to water has reduced, Dalit women still continue to access water by standing away from the source of water, ensuring that their water pots do not touch those of the upper caste persons, etc. While Dalit men and women fetch water from the same source as non-Dalits, they are being treated differently.

There is an acute water problem in the village and this had a direct effect on women. Discrimination, sometimes resulting in experiences of verbal abuse and violence has left Dalit women vulnerable. Dalit women's access to water is located at a juncture of caste, class and gender realities rooted in hierarchical power relations.

There is a shared understanding among the participants that the only way to better their situation is to appeal to government resources and power. Participants hope to end caste-based discrimination related to water with better government initiatives that provide a consistent household water supply so they do not have to depend on privately owned borewells. The inability of the state to ensure justice to Dalits by providing such adequate public water sources increases the vulnerability of women, as women often perform water related tasks. Nonetheless, there is a growing awareness about Dalit rights,

and this study aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation.



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