

# Water Battlegrounds on Caste

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*"I would like to tell you some of the reminiscence of my childhood. There was a Marathi women employed in my school. She was herself quite illiterate but observed untouchability and avoided touching me. One day, I remember, I was very thirsty. I was not allowed to touch the water tap. I told my master that I wanted to drink water. He called the peon and asked him to turn on the tap so I could drink water. Whenever the peon was absent I had to go without water. Thirsty, I had to return home and then only I could quench my thirst."*

B. R. Ambedkar, framer of Indian Constitution & Champion of Dalit cause

Water: the essence of human life, fundamental to health and survival, to living a life with human dignity. It may flow out of our taps, if we are lucky, or out of hand pumps, wells, or be collected from rivers and streams. In India the daily life of many women, particularly in rural areas, commences with a gathering at common water points to fill up vessels for the day's water needs. Village tanks or streams wash away the grime of a hard day's work in the fields or factories, whilst in urban areas ablution is a morning ritual before venturing onto the packed city streets. Moreover, water serves both an economic as well as social function, especially in a highly agrarian set-up such as rural India, where the livelihood of millions of farmers depends on adequate irrigation sources for crops from which millions obtain their staple foods. A simple but vital substance for all.

And yet, for the 260 million Dalits<sup>1</sup> in India access to water is a daily exercise of discrimination, humiliation and subjugation. It has provoked countless clashes, from heated exchanges of words to more disturbing acts of violence and socio-economic sanctions. Common water sources are not common at all; they are instead branded by a divisive line of caste as for the prerogative use of the dominant castes. Though *Article 15* of the *Indian Constitution* clearly prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste in terms of use and enjoyment of wells, bathing tanks and other public water sources, across the country today Constitutional guarantees are rendered meaningless by the blatant exclusion of one-sixth of the population from access to this basic necessity of life. This exclusion is maintained by the creation of a meticulous system of checks to circumscribe Dalits' right to water through varying untouchability practices or outright denial of water, and any steps taken by Dalits to cross this invisible line are swiftly crushed.

## Denial, Segregation and Discrimination

Around 40 dominant caste people attacked the Dalit colony of Pangal village, Muhubunagar district of Andhra Pradesh, broke into their locked houses and destroyed all they got their hands on, in retaliation for Dalits having taken water from the water tap in the dominant caste people's colony after completion of an Anti-Untouchability Conference on 16 November 2001. The Dalits were terrified and most fled from the village.

In most Indian villages Dalits not only live in segregated habitations on the outskirts of the main part of the village, but often have separate wells or separate areas of streams from which to access water. However, this seeming freedom of access to water comes at a price. Dalit women will many a time have to walk long distances just to fetch water, all the closer water sources being appropriated by the dominant castes for their exclusive use. Dalits are usually made to draw their water downstream where the water is less clean, and wherever their wells or taps are located, one can be sure that the quality of drinking water will be considerably poorer as compared to the general drinking water source enjoyed by the dominant caste villagers.

By contrast, where segregated water supplies are not found, Dalits, and in particular Dalit women, then endure a combination of any of the following untouchability practices: they cannot

<sup>1</sup> Dalits refers to those communities formerly known as untouchables, listed by the Indian Government as Scheduled Castes in acknowledgement of their specific history of caste discrimination and resulting socio-economic backwardness.

fetch water from public wells and taps, but must instead wait for the dominant castes to draw water first and then pour water into their pots; they stand in a separate queue at a different pulley to draw water from the well; and only after the dominant castes have taken their share will the Dalits be allowed to draw water. Village ponds are in many cases forbidden to Dalits for bathing purposes. Even Dalit children in school are not spared the humiliation of having segregated drinking water facilities, and as they grow up many will encounter the two-glass system in local restaurants, wherein two types of cups are used while serving tea, depending on the customer: non-Dalits get their tea in glasses, while Dalits get their tea in a metal tumbler, which they are expected to clean themselves after use. Even the tea will be poured from a good distance above to ensure no contact between the tea jug and the Dalits' tumblers. Otherwise, they will be poured drinking water into their hands lest they 'pollute' the dominant castes' cups. Even those few Dalits that are able to access political power through the local *panchayats*<sup>2</sup> encounter separate glasses set aside for water for them.

The economic dimension of water discrimination is played out for the 35.05% of Dalits (as compared to 81.18% of non-Dalits/Adivasis<sup>3</sup>) who own land in the country.<sup>4</sup> For them, being mostly marginal farmers attempting to secure their right to livelihood from their small plots of land, their fate often rests at the mercy of dominant castes, who often either deny access to water to irrigate their lands, or prohibit Dalits to irrigate their lands before them, or divert water supplies meant for Dalits' fields, or force Dalits to obtain their permission before using irrigation sources. Dominant caste muscle power or the collusion of local government officials is solicited to silence all protest, reinforcing the subjugated social status of the Dalit community.

Recognising this traditional discrimination against Dalits over water rights, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of India has noted with concern that over 20% of Dalit households lack access to potable drinking water despite the Government's alleged commitment to priority coverage of Dalit habitations for water supply. Moreover, 'the figure could be higher, given that many times Government-provided drinking water sources dry up but the population is shown as having adequate drinking water facilities.' Reviewing the progress made after 50 years of Independence, in particular the development schemes and funds earmarked to provide drinking water for the Dalit population, the Commission has strongly pushed for a comprehensive survey to identify Dalit villages with drinking water problems and immediate action to solve a long pending issue.<sup>5</sup>

Five years on, this recommendation remains on paper while Dalits continue to suffer denial of this basic facility.

Independent studies across the country have further exposed the widespread untouchability practices across all villages affecting Dalits' right to water. A survey of 52 villages conducted in 1992-93 in the State of Karnataka revealed that rarely is there free access to water taps in the dominant caste areas of the village, while 68% of Dalits had no access to the village water tank.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, a 1996 survey of 76 villages in the State of Gujarat exposed the fact that 46 villages continue to have separate water sources for Dalits. Of the remaining 23 villages with common

Though the Dalits from Chapala Dalitwada, Pullampeta in Cuddapah district of Andhra Pradesh have repeatedly informed government officials over the years of their lack of drinking water facilities, even going to the extent of parading in front of officials with their empty water jars in 2000, officials have not taken any action on the matter.

<sup>2</sup> Local system of governance, composed of elected members of village council.

<sup>3</sup> *Adivasi* refers to the indigenous peoples of India, the so-called Scheduled Tribes.

<sup>4</sup> Rural Labour Inquiry, Report of General Characteristics of Rural Labour Households, 1993-94, Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour, Shimla.

<sup>5</sup> Vol. 1, National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes 4<sup>th</sup> Report, 1996-97 & 1997-98, at p. 109.

<sup>6</sup> Sukhadeo Thorat, *The Hindu Social System and Human Rights: Enforcement with respect to Former Untouchables in India*, at pp. 15-17.

water sources, 14 villages force Dalit women to use separate taps or make them wait until dominant caste women finish drawing water and then pour water into their vessels, an act often accompanied by open derogatory remarks.<sup>7</sup>

Recently, a study undertaken with 3,000 Dalits in 50 villages across the State of Andhra Pradesh revealed that:

- 74% of Dalits surveyed face discrimination in access to water facilities;
- 68% of Dalits encounter discrimination in access to irrigation facilities;
- Hotels and restaurants keep separate utensils, including cups for tea or water, where 40% of Dalits are concerned;
- 43% of Dalits had drinking water poured into their hands as opposed to cups; and
- Discrimination in school water points, including separate taps for Dalit children, are encountered by 32% of Dalit children.<sup>8</sup>

### **Water Scarcity heightens Caste Feelings**

Moreover, this study noted that denial of access to water sources prevails across all regions, though it is more visible where water is scarce, such as Rayalaseema and Telengana regions of Andhra Pradesh. This fact is also borne out by trends across the State of Gujarat, where increasing water scarcity has re-ignited caste feelings, dominant castes laying claim to what limited water supply is available. At such times untouchability practices and caste violence are heightened to control Dalits' very security of life and livelihood, in the fight over this depleting natural resource. Dalit women, as the primary water collectors, are left particularly vulnerable. It is they who are left to fetch brackish water, or to beg for a few pitchers of water from the dominant caste landlords, a situation lending itself to widespread sexual exploitation and assault.<sup>9</sup>

Given forecasts of rising water shortages in many parts of the country, coupled with mounting summer temperatures, water is thus more and more strongly associated with social power. Whoever holds power in the local community will be able to command and enjoy water use rights. The battle lines are being drawn, but with caste still operating as a powerful weapon of mass oppression, the fate of the marginalised Dalit community in securing their right to water in the future is easily guessed unless the caste system itself is attacked.

For Ramesh Rohit, a Dalit from Sarasmund village, Vadodara district in the State of Gujarat, questioning the dominant castes for monopolising the limited water supply saw the dominant castes retaliate by cutting off his water supply. When he subsequently tried to lodge a complaint with the local police Sub-Inspector, he was manhandled. Thereafter his wife was sexually abused when, left with no other choice, she 'dared' to go to the village water source to fetch water for her family. Unable to bear the humiliation of his wife and frustrating situation, Ramesh committed suicide by consuming pesticide before the office of the Department of Social Justice in the first week of December 2000.

### **Caste Power Relations**

The pattern of unequal power relations that emerges is striking, not least the numerous methods of social control over the most basic of natural resources and their negative implications for the livelihood rights and dignity of a vast section of the Indian population. Caste discrimination is thus not merely a question of interpersonal relations, but is structural discrimination that is interwoven into the entire fabric of Indian society. One is born into a particular caste with an assigned traditional occupation, slotted into the caste-based social hierarchy that grants unequal rights of access, opportunities and entitlements. Dalits are the outcastes from the system, deemed to lie

<sup>7</sup> Id, at pp. 17-19.

<sup>8</sup> S.D.J.M. Prasad, *Untouchability Practices in Andhra Pradesh*, A Report prepared for Actionaid India, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Anosh Malekar/ Patan, "Landlords exploit the drought-hit Dalit women", <[www.ambedkar.org](http://www.ambedkar.org)>.

below all others in the social hierarchy and hence have the least access to rights and entitlements in society.

Determining this hierarchical social order in the local context is the purity and pollution polarity, the notion that some human beings are born polluted and hence should not be touched. For Dalits, traditionally assigned all degrading, menial and death-related tasks, the stigma of impurity has attached itself, setting an untouchability bar to social relations and economic mobility. The afore-mentioned untouchability practices with regards to water are some of the hundreds of practices that cut across all aspects of Dalits' lives: social, cultural, religious, economic, civil and political; practices debarring or limiting Dalits from accessing rights to land, housing, employment, education, food, political decision-making, etc.<sup>10</sup> By cutting at these core essentials for living a life of human dignity and pushing Dalits to the limits of survival, the dominant castes "use untouchability as an ingenious social mechanism to control the life and destiny of Dalits, systematically denying them access to material and human resources, ideas and information, social contacts and institutional power, etc."<sup>11</sup> Pushed to the peripheries of Indian society through this exclusion, alienation and subjugation process, Dalits are rendered powerless and vulnerable to exploitation of their labour as a springboard for the economic development of others. In other words, the caste system operates in effect as an uncontrolled, systematic economic exploitation of one community by vested dominant caste interests, utilising Brahminic religious dictates of purity and pollution and of *dharmā*<sup>12</sup> to perpetuate the cycle of subjugation.

Notably, whilst other communities have been able to make some progress through the system, achieving some socio-economic mobility in the process of development of the country, Dalits have been the one community systematically oppressed and denied opportunities to secure their place in the development process. Though over time the avoidance of physical contact with 'impure' Dalits may have diminished in many villages, caste discriminatory behavioural attitudes and untouchability forms have not likewise disappeared from the daily life of a Dalit.<sup>13</sup> In this context water, as the most common medium of purification,<sup>14</sup> becomes a crucial "instrument to determine the rigours of socio-ritual purity and pollution of the human body."<sup>15</sup> This translates into inequitable access to, control over and distribution of water and water use rights to the Dalit community. Hence, it will not be until the caste system's conscious and subconscious hold over Indian citizens is broken that humane sharing of this vital resource will be seen.

### State's Response

The magnitude of rights violations against the Dalit community, particularly over access to and use of the life essential of water, begs the question: what has been the response of the Indian State, which has a Constitutional duty under *Article 46* to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and in particular of the Scheduled Castes, and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation? Though *Article 17* of the *Indian Constitution* abolishes untouchability and prohibits its practice in any form, clear evidence exists from independent studies in different states, from the government-appointed National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and most importantly from

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<sup>10</sup> The Study across 50 Andhra Pradesh villages recorded 150 forms of untouchability practices currently experienced by Dalits on a routine basis - S.D.J.M. Prasad, *Untouchability Practices in Andhra Pradesh*, A Report prepared for Actionaid India, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, "Dalit Right to Life and Security" in *Black Paper: Broken Promises and Dalits Betrayed*, 2000, at p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ordering of society whereby religiously ordained rules prescribing one's path in life are to be strictly followed. As such, Dalits are destined to follow the tasks and duties delineated to them, to accept the caste discrimination meted out to them without protest. Breach of these norms entitles dominant castes to impose sanctions on the Dalits.

<sup>13</sup> Sakshi Human Rights Watch – Andhra Pradesh Monitor 2000.

<sup>14</sup> *Manusmṛti* (Laws of Manu), the Hindu text which codifies the caste system, prescribed that when a Brahmin, who occupies the highest rank in the caste hierarchy, has touched an outcast (Dalit), he becomes pure only by bathing – Ch. V para. 85.

<sup>15</sup> Deepa Joshi & Ben Fawcett, "Water, Hindu Mythology and an Unequal Social Order in India", at p.1.

Dalits themselves, that untouchability practices over water and water use rights thrive in supposedly modern India.

The Indian State is also bound by its international human rights obligations to secure safe, acceptable, physically and economically acceptable water and water facilities towards its citizens, being signatory to the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966 (ICESCR)*.<sup>16</sup> This right is one that entails an obligation of immediate fulfilment on the State, even where severe resource constraints exist, without discrimination on the basis of, amongst other factors, social or other status.<sup>17</sup> A special obligation arising from this right is to provide those without sufficient means with water and water facilities, and to give special attention to individuals and groups that have traditionally faced difficulties in exercising water rights.<sup>18</sup>

The response of the State to severely curtailed water rights of marginalised Dalits has been conspicuous in its rhetoric, backed by little concrete action. Whilst effective groundwater regulation is emerging as a single most critical issue of rural governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for a densely populated India, with several States hitting increasing levels of water scarcity, little effort is being made to mobilise local communities to check water excesses and to specifically protect rights of access to sufficient water for daily use for Dalits.<sup>19</sup> Even where new rural water users' associations structures have been put into place, such as Andhra Pradesh, operating parallel to the local system of panchayat governance with the aim to allow the people themselves to get involved in the management of the water they use, social factors of caste inequality and discrimination are conveniently ignored. Without access to affirmative action in these new schemes, Dalits find themselves once more excluded from any say over use and management of water resources, whilst the power and control over water by dominant caste landlords is consolidated and legitimised behind these new associations. Unhindered, untouchability practices flourish and of the 170 million Indian citizens who cannot access potable drinking water, a large percentage remain Dalits. Moreover, the open apathy or collusion of the government machinery in perpetuating caste based discriminatory water allocation and use practices is borne out by their continuing high prevalence.

In drought-prone Chakwara village, barely 50 km from the Rajasthan State capital of Jaipur, dominant caste Jats, Gujjars and Brahmins imposed a fine of Rs. 50,000/- (approx. US \$1,400) for two Dalits compromising the *maryada* (dignity) of the village by breaking its tradition when they dared to bathe in the public pond prohibited to Dalits. Further, a socio-economic boycott was imposed on the entire Dalit community from December 2001 in retaliation for the Dalits demanding the right to access the *ghats* (platform with steps) meant for bathing in the public pond in the village. A *sadbhavana* (harmony) rally organised by various social movements and the Centre for Dalit Human Rights on 21 September 2002 against this and other untouchability practices meted out to Chakwara Dalits was attacked by a 10,000-strong dominant caste mob armed with *lathis* (wooden baton), swords and catapults, critically injuring the police force who were posted protect the Dalit villagers. Meanwhile, the State machinery has chosen to ignore the issue by closing the case, expressing its **inability** to take action against the dominant castes of Chakwara, despite the illegality of the dominant castes' actions. Meanwhile, police orders allowing Dalits to access their fundamental right to water are ignored with impunity.

What the Indian Government has instead chosen to do is to go on the offensive against growing assertions of rights and campaigns against untouchability and caste or descent-based discrimination, particularly where international visibility is being given to such issues that affect the entire structure of both Indian civil society and the State itself. Tabling its report to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 1996, the Indian Government sought to exclude queries on caste and obfuscate its poor performance in securing the socio-economic

<sup>16</sup> Article 11 ICESCR: the right to an adequate standard of living, which includes the right to water.

<sup>17</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment no. 15: *The Right to Water*, para. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Id, paras. 15 & 16.

<sup>19</sup> See Mihir Shah, "Water Policy Blues", *The Hindu*, 07.06.2002. His comments refer to the new national Water Policy adopted in 2002, which is a "hotchpotch of contradictory perspectives, completing lacking in integrity" and ignoring recommendations of the National Consultative Committee on Water.

development of its Dalit citizens. Its tactic was to delve instead into semantics on the term 'caste', stating that it "denotes a "social" and "class" distinction and is not based on race. It has its origins in the functional division of Indian society during ancient times.... It is obvious that the use of the word 'descent' in the *Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 1965* clearly refers to 'race' [as distinct from 'caste']."<sup>20</sup> Subsequently the Indian Government's reports to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,<sup>21</sup> the Committee on the Rights of the Child<sup>22</sup> and the Human Rights Committee<sup>23</sup> have all sought to screen out mention or criticism of its dismal Dalit human rights record behind descriptions of paper guarantees of rights, both legislative and policy. This tactic has prompted all three committees, in their concluding observations on India's reports, to express their concern over the social practice of the caste system and the obstacle it presents to overcoming continued discrimination and violence against Dalits, and hence protecting rights guaranteed under the respective international human rights conventions.

Against this background, concerted advocacy efforts by both Dalit groups, campaigns such as the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights and national and international Dalit solidarity groups, particularly at the Third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa in 2001 and with the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the United Nations Sub-Commission for Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, have succeeded in exposing India's 'hidden apartheid' of the caste system to the world community. In the process, linkages are being formed with communities from Asia and Africa with their own caste and analogous social hierarchies based on 'work and descent', fighting for recognition before the international community to pressurise the respective governments to take action over caste oppression around the world.

In response to the growing groundswell of condemnation of caste and analogous forms of 'work and descent' based discrimination, in August 2002 the CERD Committee has issued a General Recommendation (No. XXIX), strongly condemning 'discrimination based on **'descent'**', which includes discrimination against members of communities based on forms of social stratification such as caste and analogous systems of inherited status, as a violation of Article 1 of the *Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 1965*. In particular, paragraph 16 of this General Recommendation urges States such as India to secure for everyone the right of access on an equal and non-discriminatory basis to any place or service intended for use by the general public, such as the right to water for drinking, bathing or irrigation purposes. Dalit groups await to see whether the Indian Government will continue to flout national and international human rights norms, or summon the courage to tackle caste discrimination head on and discharge its constitutional duty to secure fundamental rights without discrimination to its Dalit citizens. To sit by and let millions of Dalits in this country go thirsty any longer is surely a crime against humanity and any moral conscience.

### **Taking Matters into their own hands**

Given the abject failure of the Indian State to secure for Dalits their fundamental right to water, Dalits around the country are slowly but steadily voicing their protests against discriminatory water use practices or outright denial of water to their community. Realising the Government's disinterest towards, if not collusion in perpetration of, their plight, and that transferring management of local water resources to the local community amounts to little more than reinforcement of Dalits' discrimination in access and water use rights at the hands of local dominant caste villagers, stories are emerging of Dalit assertions to secure their right to equal access to water.

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<sup>20</sup> CERD/C/299/Add.3, 1996, para. 6.

<sup>21</sup> CEDAW/C/IND/1, submitted on 2 February 1999.

<sup>22</sup> CRC/C/28/Add.10, submitted 7 July 1997.

<sup>23</sup> CCPR/C/76/Add.6, submitted on 17 July 1996.

At 5:00 a.m. on 2 July 1996 Rekhaben joined the queue of Dalits and dominant caste women at the common well in Rojid village of Gujarat State as usual. However, that morning, three dominant caste Patel women who joined the queue behind her immediately set themselves at a distance from Rekhaben and started hurling insults at her for daring to stay in line when they, as higher castes, were also waiting for water. When Rekhaben questioned the unfairness of her having to move to the end of the queue just because women from a higher caste were insisting, they set upon her, beating her up with the help of three dominant caste men. But Rekhaben refused to accept this humiliation, channelling her anger with the support of her community to file a police complaint. She stood her ground over the next year amidst threats from the dominant caste Patels and a social boycott that rendered the entire Dalit community without work or access to local shops. The local authorities conveniently turned a blind eye to the Dalit community's plight. When finally the court awarded punishment for the dominant caste culprits, the entire Dalit community felt vindicated. A well was installed nearer to their section of the village and the intensity of caste discrimination against the Dalits by the Patels has lessened, though the social boycott remains in place to this day.

In Guravareddypalem village in Prakasham district of Andhra Pradesh, Dalits were drawing water from the well not for their own needs, but only to carry it to the dominant caste's houses. There, they had to wait patiently anywhere up to a couple of hours for a dominant caste person to fill their pitchers, sometimes returning empty-handed. It took one Dalit, Nadella Anjaiah to change all this in 2001. Thirsty after hours of hard work in the fields, he gave up waiting patiently after several hours and took water from the village well. Caught by a dominant caste Reddy villager, the entire Dalit community found the next day that they were barred from access to the well itself. Instead of taking the matter lying down, the Dalit community filed an official complaint, eventually securing officials' help to gain access to the well. Though the district administration sought to diffuse the caste tensions by offering the Dalits a separate well, this option was opposed as amounting to encouraging untouchability against them. Eventually four Reddy caste culprits were arrested for their denial of water to the Dalits and the Dalits got direct access to water for the first time in the village's history.

Finally, in Seetanagaram village in Andhra Pradesh, the continual breaking down of the Dalits' water pump prompted the Dalit villagers to send Durga Rao on a training course on water pump repair provided by British charity WaterAid. Rao returned and took out a loan to set up a water pump repair business, soon becoming in high demand. Though the dominant caste villagers at first refused to let Rao touch the borewell they were installing, when faced with the only option of a skilled Dalit to set up the well, the dominant caste villagers relented. Slowly, respect for the Dalits of the village has grown and some caste barriers crumbled, so much so that the local teashop owner has stopped the untouchability practice of the two-glass system in his shop. However, debarring Dalits from village festivals and dominant caste marriage remains in place, a testimony to the tenacity of descent-based caste discrimination.

### **Solidarity and Action needed**

The task of dismantling a social system that has been in place for three thousand years and replacing it with a humane society that does not recognise any caste identity is a Herculean task. And yet this is precisely what Dalit groups around the country are striving and working towards. Each little effort paves the way for increasing action and protests from a hitherto silenced community. The price, in terms of backlashes from dominant castes, is worth it for them. But more than ever there is a need for civil society to come forward, both at the national and international levels, to pressurise the Indian State to fulfil democratic promises of equality and development for all, especially with regards to securing basic rights such as water to all citizens without discrimination.

The State must be made to not only elaborate and adopt plans and programmes of socio-economic development of Dalits with regards to securing their right to water, but these plans must be implemented with sufficient funds and that implementation process carefully monitored. Civil society groups can play a part in monitoring this process, in exposing any irregularities and in highlighting positive measures taken.

Concurrently, the question of caste must be brought to the forefront of national debate and measures such as media campaigns and human rights education put in place to sensitise the population as to the need to eradicate caste prejudices and build a caste-free society, to create a culture of human rights grounded in equal respect for all human beings. In this regard, the bureaucratic and law and order machinery, in particular, must be targeted to set a standard and to drive home a message that caste discrimination will no longer be tolerated, and those

continuing to perpetrate untouchability practices and atrocities against the Dalit community, especially with respect to their enjoyment of their fundamental right to water, will be stringently punished.

At the international level there is much that can be done. Inter-governmental organisations, including international financial institutions, and international donor agencies must ensure that development or assistance projects that they support do take into account the economic and social situation of Dalits and work with this community in particular to ensure their right to water and other basic rights. Meanwhile, advocacy with national governments, with political blocs such as the European Union and with the United Nations must continue to highlight the plight of 260 million Dalits and the estimated 100 million others across the world who face similar discrimination based on work and descent, collectively pressurising the Indian Government from the outside to fulfil its human rights obligations towards its Dalit citizens.

It is only then that Dalits will enjoy equal water access and usage rights. All other efforts to work within a caste society to allow Dalits to access water become piecemeal as they do not add the root causes of denial of water rights, that is, the inherent social inequity in the caste system that sanctifies rights denials to this community. Ultimately, in a water scarce world equitable sharing of water resources is a global concern, and social systems which sanctify widespread discrimination in access to this life essential fall within the purview of all. For the Dalits of India, they can only hope for so much, for solidarity in their daily struggles to get a glass of water to drink. Is that too much to ask?

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