

Projection of the Atrocities on the Dalits

A Comparative Study of Premanand Gajvee's One-Act Play A Sip Of Water and the Film Article 15

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ABSTRACT

The present study of Premanand Gajvee's *A SIP OF WATER* identifies the multiplicity of issues and challenges faced by Dalits in accessing water from common sources. On account of their social exclusion, Dalits suffer from physical as well as mental anguish. Discrimination against the Dalits is rampant on account of untouchability and physical abuse. Representative of Gajvee's social concerns and caste preoccupations, this play is a scathing indictment of the inequalities that continue to prevail within the Hindu religion and Indian society. This paper also shows how the Dalits are used as just mere tools for the upper caste people's political agenda as presented in this one-act play and, in the movie, *ARTICLE 15*.

Keywords- Dalit, discrimination, politics, untouchability, caste, *A Sip Of Water*, *Article 15*.

'Dalit' is a term that has been embraced by individuals of an untouchable group in India to depict and distinguish them. 'Dalit' envelops the defenceless portion of the Indian society, which lives at the limit of the town, just as Adivasis, landless homestead workers, laborers, the enduring masses, and migrant and criminal clans and ladies. It isn't just material to the untouchables yet to all who are falling behind socially and monetarily in the nation's formative procedure. The term 'Dalit' is taken diversely by various researchers. The conversation regarding who might be recognized as a Dalit writer will be the continuous practice of fictional examination.

Premanand Gajvee is a prominent Marathi playwright. After storming the Marathi stage with his one-act *Ghotbhar Pani (A Sip of Water)* in 1977, which has been staged over 3,000 times, Gajvee has written eleven one-acts and thirteen full-length plays, besides a novel, two short story collections, and a volume of poetry. He co-founded the Bodhi Natya Parishad in Mumbai in 2003 intending to encourage new, socially relevant plays in Marathi.

Drama is a very serious medium of art. The purpose of theatre is primarily to awaken the masses. We do not take theatre or drama seriously nowadays. Drama is a good medium to understand the social and cultural

dimensions of those times. We first need to stop considering theatre as a compact way of entertainment. From the time when Vijay Tendulkar wrote plays, there has been very little progress in experimental theatre. That's why experimental theatre kept merging with professional theatre. This doesn't mean that our society doesn't have people who introspect anymore. It simply means that no one is willing to explore. That's the scene with the theatre industry today. We have stopped taking risks and writing about real issues. In the book *Playwright at the Centre: Marathi drama from 1843 to the Present* authored by Shanta Gokhale, she reproduces an interview with Gajvee where he divides his plays into three groups: "those that deal with relationships between individuals, those that deal with the relationships between the individual and society and those that deal with relationships between societies".

In *A Sip of Water*, without giving any names to the characters, Gajvee uses numbers to represent the characters and used them as his mouthpiece. The play begins with two thirsty youths who are searching for water to drink. One of them is working on a research paper and they are from the city. They seem to possess little idea about the brutality of caste discrimination in rural areas. When one of them tries to drink water from the river, he

is beaten by an upper-caste member of society. He is accused of polluting the water of the river. *Article 15* is named after the provision in the Indian Constitution that prohibits “discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth”. It takes the case of two missing girls who are suspected to be raped and murdered. It shows the impact of societal divisions that have been a core part of the Indian psyche for thousands of years.

Indian society was divided into four varnas based on the role people play in society, politics, and economy. However, unlike European guilds that anyone could join based on their professional inclinations, caste was governed by birth. Therefore, a trader’s son was destined to be a trader, a craftsman’s son a craftsman, a soldier’s son a soldier, and a priest’s son a priest. However, some people were kept outside this varna system. These people performed the so-called ‘menial’ jobs like cleaning sewage and garbage disposal. They were considered ‘untouchable’ by the other castes in the social hierarchy and forced to live outside the city or village limits. These people faced discrimination and exclusion for centuries and therefore ended up with little or no access to education, the one empowering tool that could help them level the playing field. All castes, excluding Brahmins and the warrior caste (Kshatriyas), were barred from equal access to education. Interestingly women of all castes were similarly disempowered. An example of discrimination and exclusion is that of how the Peshwas of Pune treated Dalits. They were not only forced to wear a small pot tied with a string around their neck to collect their spit but many Dalits were also made to wear a broom behind their back to wipe away their footprints.

In the film, Ayaan Ranjan is a clueless young police officer whose ideals – much like his elegant clothes – are unsullied by ground realities as he arrives in the caste cauldron that is Lalgaon in rural Uttar Pradesh. Ayaan soon sees that his officers seem uninterested in the investigation of those lower-caste girls. There is a similarity between the youths of the play and the young police officer. They all belong to city life and are unaware of the ground realities of the rural areas. But as soon as they reach the rural area, their reverie is broken. They realized that rural India is not what it seems to be from the outside. In the film, when the city-based new police officer enters the countryside of India, he is told not to drink water from one Pasi community, an untouchable community. Likewise, one of the youths also is denied water as he is from an untouchable community.

Water is synonymous with life and therefore it’s the most integral and inevitable part of each individual. These disabilities are most pronounced about access to water and sanitation. Caste-based discrimination leading to human rights violations regarding drinking water makes it an important social issue. Dalits’ access to water is usually on the goodwill of the dominant caste. The worst and most inhumane form of discrimination and untouchability is seen when it comes to water. Most of the

violence starts for the very cause as Dalits try to access the public well or hand pumps. There are numerous case studies on violence against Dalits accessing water. The deprivation of a basic human right such as water is a constant reminder of the inherent indignity of human existence.

Dalits don’t have anywhere to go. They cannot even go to the police. We come to know about the incident of Chokha Kamble. The police beat Chokha Kamble and threatened him that they would break his legs and rape his wife if he complained. Likewise, the film also shows the corrupt police system where justice is denied to the lower caste people at every step throughout their lives. Higher-caste police already have a biased mind. They assume that the complaints of Dalits are made up or bogus. It is with this mentality that they investigate. Any person who has already presumed something as wrong will ultimately prove the case wrong to prove him or herself right. The police take on the role of the judiciary and determine the merits of the case even before pursuing investigations. Cases at all levels are influenced by caste bias and corruption. Police often escape liability for their abuses of Dalits and are rarely punished for their negligence in the non-registration of caste-related cases. Even when cases are registered, the absence of special courts to try them can delay conviction for up to three to four years. They are biased because of their caste. The police in general try to avoid registration. They want to settle cases with compensation. There are many power politics at the local level. Unless there is public pressure, the police administration tends to side with landowning communities that have political clout. A scheduled-caste person is therefore at the mercy of landlords because there are police pressures and other pressures to compromise the case. Dalits generally hesitate to approach the police with their complaints. *Article 15* and *A Sip of Water* have done a fine job of depicting how the marginalized are denied justice.

Discrimination over water is in practice mostly in villages. Gajvee portrays how city folks see this social injustice as a strange incident. The city people have not beheld it and so they shoot it in their cameras when they see it in villages. They admire how these people can withstand this and practiced to live within these limits. City people can see the practices of the village, but they could not understand those practices properly. Gajvee vividly portrays this as a conversation between a Dalit and a non-Dalit. A Dalit asks the minister, “We don’t have water to drink. The city folk come and take our photos. The village folk come and break our pots and throw them out. How are we to live, my lord?” The minister thinks to solve the problem by digging a well for the untouchables which shows that they don’t care about their slogan of “one village, one water source”. This indicates that the political parties do not at all care for the Dalits. They only care about their votes. They employ different types of electoral strategies to obtain votes from the Dalits. They don’t even support the emergence of new Dalit leaders

who can create problems for them. They try to buy or kill him anyhow. Here in the play, the newly emerged dalit leader Bhausaheb is bought with some money. He left his village folk to suffer. In the film, there is also a Dalit leader called Nishad who is ultimately killed. Both the Dalit leaders Bhausaheb and Nishad both represent their community but get an unfortunate ending. Nishad's statement, "Hum kabhi Harijan ho jaate hai, kabhi Bahujan ho jaate hai, bas Jan nahin ban paa rahey hai ki Jan Gan Man mein hamari bhi ginti ho jaaye" (sometimes we are called Harijan, sometimes we are labeled Bahujan, but we have never managed to be just Jan, people so that we can be counted among India's general citizenry), could well be seen as the film's way of noting that while the Mahatma – who popularised the term Harijan (Children of God) – actively campaigned against untouchability, his interpretation of caste was flawed.

Though the Indian constitution envisaged the abolition of 'untouchability' and an end to discrimination, prejudice is rampant among the affluent sections of society and those entrusted with upholding the constitution have tended to treat Dalits with utter insensitivity. The Government of India has attempted on several occasions to legislate specifically to address the issue of caste-related violence that affects SCs and STs. Aside from the Constitutional abolition of untouchability, there has been the Untouchability (Offences) Act of 1955, which was amended in the same year to become the Protection of Civil Rights Act. It was determined that neither of those Acts was effective, so the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 (POA) came into force. The POA designated specific crimes against SCs and STs as "atrocities" – a criminal act that has "the quality of being shockingly cruel and inhumane" – which should be prosecuted under its terms rather than existing criminal law. It created corresponding punishments. Its purpose was to curb and punish violence against Dalits, including humiliations such as the forced consumption of noxious substances. Other atrocities included forced labour, denial of access to water and other public amenities, and sexual abuse. The Act permitted Special Courts exclusively to try POA cases. The Act called on states with high levels of caste violence to appoint qualified officers to monitor and maintain law and order.

Particularly in rural areas, these communities have to face social barriers and institutional apathy even to get a complaint registered for an atrocity committed upon them by the upper castes. Dalits need their independent politics to fight against inequality and oppression.

The pivotal issue regarding Dalit literature is that the writer and the text cannot be separated. A reader's interpretation may be varied based on whether he or she belongs to the Dalit community or the elite caste. The caste is the major factor that brings exploitation for Dalit communities in India and the Dalit writers who write

about their sufferings and exploitation cannot be separated because they both are interdependent emphatically. Dalit writers do not keep the urbane readers on a pedestal while creating a work of art. Their main intention is to inform and expose the evil practice that shapes Indian society. They write to throw light on the problems of society. Unlike other writers, they do not have pre-conceived sets of audiences or readers to acknowledge their work. It is also important to note that form is something that a Dalit writer is not concerned about because the context lays the foundation of their writing. Therefore, the readers have to set aside their preference for "form over content" while reading works produced by Dalit writers.

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 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 no real changes to the social fabric of Hindu society and the power-based distribution and access to basic resources in such societies. In India, you either are oppressed by caste or are 'casteless. The latter is a privilege only the 'upper' castes can choose to enjoy. To be casteless or caste blind is a privilege that only the upper caste can enjoy. Because caste is not a problem, but rather a privilege for them; they can easily ignore its existence and still benefit from the social and cultural capital associated with it. In rural India, caste manifests itself in a crude form and is easier to identify and fight, but in an urban setting, it appears in a less-obvious form.

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