



‘Where has my Water gone?’ A Song from Mafua struggles and the Dalit Cultural Movement in Maharashtra, India

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‘Water is life!’ Or is it 10 rupees a bottle?

It is usual to hear, amongst other truisms, that water is indispensable to life, if not more solemnly that water *is* life. Water is one of the most universally necessary resources, and yet strongly resists sociological analysis. Indeed, what could we say that engineers, water experts or hydrologists have not already said? It has, however, not escaped the minds and bodies affected by its recurrent lack or sudden rise that water is also, if not first and foremost, a ‘natural’ resource whose ecological and economic values are constructed by very entrenched political processes (Baviskar 2007). In the western Indian state of Maharashtra, the agricultural sector is becoming increasingly fragile in the wake of climate change, with longer dry spells and more frequent drought cycles. While approximately 80% of agriculture is still rainfed, the last few years have witnessed some of the worst droughts in decades, affecting millions of farmers and bringing back haunting memories for the older generation who had experienced the historic water scarcity around the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s².

Inasmuch as surface and ground water are considered, the scenario of management and allocation is supposed to be spiralling from bad to worse: ‘All Indian water bodies within and near population centres are now grossly polluted with organic and hazardous pollutants. Interstate disputes over river water allocations are becoming increasingly intense and widespread. Not a single Indian city can provide clean water that can be drunk from the tap on a 24x7 basis’ (Biswas, Tortajada, and Saklani 2017). Yet such a statement leaves open the question of the popular perception of water and its political dynamics, the ways in which its lack or abundance is pictured and portrayed, and the underlying reasons for these, amongst certain sections of Indian society. We will thus illustrate these social and political dynamics through the gaze of a critical and intellectual entente amongst scholars-activists-social workers gravitating around the region of Nagpur in Eastern Maharashtra and concerned by water issues.

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2 For a historic appraisal of some of its socio-political consequences, see Joseph 2006; Patel 2006. For a contemporary view, see the following 13-part series on the Marathwada drought in 2016 by Tushar Dhara, journalist at First Post. URL: <http://www.first-post.com/india/marathwada-drought-the-region-is-parched-impooverished-and-desperate-the-exploiters-turned-into-the-exploited-2715116.html>



Drawing of Parmeshwar and Veena ploughing the Field

Development and Destruction, a timeworn Dialectic of Power

In the region of the Wainganga river in Eastern Maharashtra, the landscape offers an infinity of images emblematic of an early industrial onslaught in the shape of debris from crumbling houses in submerged villages, open mining sites encroaching upon forest land, sewage flowing from the swelling city of Nagpur or flying ash pollution coming from various thermal plants. This description may appear a bit too impressionistic to summarize the historic lifeline and major basin of Vidarbha, yet it actually comes short of listing the various 'dispossession and displacement projects'³ either already existing or signalled as upcoming in these regions formerly known as the Central Provinces and Berar. Designated as a 'backward area' in the official jargon, the Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation more graciously calls this forested terrain 'the land of oranges and [endangered] tigers'⁴, preferably remembered for its yesteryear prestige in hosting the background of the mythical Jungle Book. It would however be unfounded to consider Vidarbha – like many other regions in the Indian subcontinent – not to also be seriously endangered by the 'iron cage' of capitalism and its multiple impacts on the environment and rural social groups. The Wainganga is already home to the Gosikhurd dam, a project whose promised bounty (250,000 ha of irrigation) has been expected for more than three decades but which has more tangibly become a reservoir of corruption and displaced up to 100,000 people, most of whom may find it difficult to recover from paying the cost of development (Cabalion 2018 and South

3 Felix Padel and Samanendra Das's substitute expression of 'displacement projects' deserves to be extended to the phenomenon of dispossession at large, the latter not being necessarily accompanied by the former in every case. See Padel and Das 2010.

4 It is sometimes even called the 'California of Maharashtra', though the person who coined that expression was surely being ironic.

Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People 2017). The river basin at large has undergone and may experience further tremendous morphological transformations in years to come through the demiurgic projects of interlinking river segments (Bhagwat 2015, Ghoge 2017) symbolizing the nation's engineering ambition and its conquering *ethos* over nature. While college level B.Ed. engineering students in the region are made to write papers to justify their corporation's technological hubris, the official praise goes that they will solve the problems of cotton farmers whose suicide mortality rate is very high in western Vidarbha (Mishra and Reddy 2010), not to mention the case of malnutrition in Melghat, infamous for deaths due to starvation amongst its important *Adivasi* (tribal) population.

Against such a backdrop, this essay is a piecemeal attempt to present a sketch of the water scenario in that region of India alongside the perceptive lyrics of an activist song originating from a context of people's mobilization. Titled '*Maaii, paani kutha gela*' ('Mum, where has the water gone?'), it was written and sung by one of the authors of this article, Dhammasangini Ramgorakh, and enjoyed during fieldwork by the others, for it astutely articulates if not unites the issue of water and the reality and utopia of the *dalit* cultural movement,⁵ and underlines the brunt of droughts versus the abundance of water parks; in brief, it convokes the issue of inequalities in contemporary India towards all kind of liquid forms.⁶



Drawing of the Gosikhurd Dam

Mafua: An Historic Articulation between Buddhism, Dalit struggles and the Water Movement

To enter the political arena of western India, we would like to introduce the unfamiliar reader of Indian politics to a very small word which yet retains immense force and meaning in the Indian space of social movements: *Mafua*. As the fused concatenation of Marx-Phule-Ambedkar, it encapsulates a decades-old infusion of painstaking (and incomplete) convergence between class and caste struggles. While Marx requires little introduction due to his legacy of social transformation, the other two characters continue to struggle for a well-deserved acknowledgement beyond social science academia or India's borders. To put it briefly, while Gandhi is known and revered almost everywhere and has a kind of following that many Christian mission-

⁵ The *dalit* cultural movement can be understood as the social space of artists-cum-activists and ex-untouchables from various castes, often ex-Mahars but not uniquely, entrepreneurs of causes and cultural forms of expression in the field of aesthetics (literature, music, theatre, etc.) and intellectual interventions at large indulging in a critical reading of the Indian social structure.

⁶ This should undeniably and inextricably link the issue of water to the issue of waste. See Singh, Goyal, and Jain 2017.

aries might envy, one cannot say the same of Ambedkar, whose law is the everyday rule for Indians – as the principal redactor of the Constitution – and yet who does not appear on the rupee note, as one common grievance puts it (a grievance which recently produced a major musical hit in Marathi amongst Ambedkar's followers – *kayda bhimacha, photo gandhicha*⁷). Our argument here is not to decry this fact but rather to engage with this historical bias and its meaning. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) is probably one of the most important Indian politicians of the Independence era, and at the same time one of the least-known abroad. Less mentioned than Nehru or Gandhi, Babasaheb, as he was popularly known, nevertheless occupies a most prominent place in the Indian pantheon of national figures. While Nehruvian ideals have long been considered to be in decline and stand defeated by neoliberal policies, only Gandhian repertoires of contention and Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence can actually compare – partly due to their international fame and circulation – with the incredible postcolonial career of Ambedkarite politics and (counter-)narratives at home. Gandhi and Ambedkar embody two very entrenched type of worldviews within the Indian political and activist social space. In the former these two figures were notoriously opposed. In the activist sphere, Gandhian and Ambedkari repertoires of contention are in fact nowadays considered complimentary to many social movements around the country, members of which will quote Gandhi in environmental politics while advancing Ambedkar in demands for social justice and extended affirmative action. The base of their historical opposition revolves around their competition to represent the former Untouchables.

The case of Maharashtra has already long attracted academic discussion around social movement history, for it is well-known as one of the early states hosting major social struggles. Particularly renowned are those against castes (the Non-Brahmin movement in the 19th century as well as the *Dalit* movement in the 20th century), a position today quintessentially attached to the trajectory and legacy of Ambedkar, who converted to Buddhism in 1956 to escape from the Hindu fold. While this narrative of *dalit* struggles is well known (Omvedt 1994), Maharashtra harbours no less a myriad of left-wing workers' movements (and small parties) as well as agrarian struggles (Kude 1986) that have continually infused political practices and claimed descentance from Marxist ideology on the one hand, as well as lower-caste struggles and Ambedkar on the other. These are less famous despite having left traces all over the state in matters related to land and water policies (Chowdhury 2013; Joël Cabalion 2014, 2015).



Photo of Submergence in Ghaadegaat

⁷ Youtube url : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BReeoF-8QbY>

Are Lower Castes and Dalits Water Heroes? Mythical Pasts and Modern Tensions

During ancient times, the Buddha acted as a mediator in the conflict over the use of the river Rohini, at the times of the Sakiya Republic and Koliya tribe. The culprit, as recalled, was already a dam. Water was insufficient, then war broke out. When the Buddha went to settle the conflict, the legend recalls that he used the argument that water was of less value than human lives (Schumann 2004). Before Independence during the colonial era, Savitribai, the wife of Jyotirao Phule, a lower-caste social reformer, opened her well to *ati-shudras* (an old term to designate former untouchables), one action amongst many others of the emerging Non-Brahmin movement (O'Hanlon 2002). In brief, 'water heroes', as they are sometimes re-discovered for the benefit of popular and activist representation (Vora 2009), quite often extract adherents from the lower rungs of Indian society or claim to work for them. Can such a view pretend to be accurate, considering most of them also supported dam construction in their time? Apart from being one of the most important figures of the low-caste protest in Western India, Jyotirao Phule was also a contractor from the gardener caste (Mali) who contributed to the construction of a dam on the Mula-Mutha river near Pune. We could also take the example of Rammanohar Lohia, a socialist who gave his name to the Lohia Sagar dam (lit. the dam of the ocean of Lohia) while Ambedkar supervised the advent of Damodar Valley Authority during his political career (a project inspired by the 'Tennessee Valley Authority model' in the US, just a few decades earlier), as well as promoted the necessity of a unified federal water policy. We can of course consider that the modern *épistémè* had not yet been much deconstructed, or was just about to be, technologically speaking at least and amongst these leaders. It is worth noting that most activists inheriting their ideological baggage today mostly oppose the planning of mega projects for these now seem to take a different economic road.



Photos of Protests Around the Dam Site (GPSS courtesy)

As a simple reminder, *Dalits* were notably banned from using water bodies used by upper-caste Hindus. Ambedkar's Mahad *satyagraha* in 1927 (a march to allow untouchables to use water in a public tank) was a fight against this particularly violent form of social separatism. Defending, claiming or simply recalling the struggles of former untouchables over water resources is thus neither a faint debate nor an anachronistic human rights discussion. It is in fact an important reminder of the spatial dimension of social inequalities, especially of the reality that Indian *dalits* and *adivasis* are still, all other things being equal, more often deprived of access to water resources than other social groups, and more often pay the cost of 'development' by granting 'the right of passage' for the edification of dams and thermal plants which affect their livelihoods.



Photo of Mahad Satyagraha with Ambdekar

Mafua Songs and (neo) Bhimgit: an essential Mediation for Water struggles?

The ex-Mahar caste has been traditionally associated with singing. As reminded by Rege, 'in the Ambedkar era, old forms of publicity like the community *bhajan* [devotional singing] came to be thematically reformulated. The "private" forms of expression, like women's compositions of the "ovi" (songs of the grinding stone), "*palana*" (songs of the cradle), adopted overtly political themes of a caste society' (Rege 2008: 17). As a space of cultural production, songs to Bhimrao Ambedkar – *bhimgit* – already have a long history and large audience. Since at least the 1930s, they have accompanied the process of social and political emancipation of former untouchables. While *bhimgit* have undergone many evolutions, they have often played a crucial role in various resistance movements as a circulating cultural good of struggle. Dhammasangini's song aptly sends the message: today's stake for *neo-bhimgit* is to ask new ambedkari questions of those in power, and no longer to instigate statues of great leaders, gardens and *maidans* (public ground) in the name of Ambedkar – or even umbrellas for his statues so they do not get drenched by monsoon rains. The stake is to ask questions to disturb and disrupt projects relating to special economic zones, to cancel water parks or to state the impossibility of deviating water rights to entities of the private sector or even state corporations. New *bhimgit*, we may say, are one significant cultural future amongst others for the ambedkari movement, if they not only combine popular songs and idioms of rural areas, but also address new political issues beyond a mere politics of representation.

If the cultural base of the water movement in Maharashtra is diverse and notably draws from the integrative aspects of the famous hindu Warkari saint tradition, the actualization of water struggles indirectly results from their association with *dalit* struggles, spearheaded by most of the agents of the lower castes and the ambedkari cultural movement for many years in various literary and musical forms. Water can thus be a practical rejoinder for such a programme. Fighting for water rights is akin to struggling generally to get one's position in society recognized. At present the *dalits* in India experience an everyday fragile existence and struggle in order to keep their historical legacy and few legal victories alive against age-old practices of discrimination. Music is one important way for them to do so, reminding us how 'struggles over cultural meanings are inseparable from struggles of survival' (Rege 2002).



Picture of the Dikshabhumi and of a Bhimgit Troupe

Conclusion

Between dams, GMOs and nuclear plants (certainly not a very subtle triad), is there any room left for farmers who wish to engage in a symbolically non-aggressive form of agriculture? This question receives much argumentative currency from the organic movement wherein incentives for producing in a so-called sustainable fashion are still contradictory and do not necessarily imply the preservation of the environment. The impression that more dams are still being built, and that water still continues to be lacking or is distributed in a skewed way in the Indian context, may endure for some time. Displaced peasants and those whose lands have been submerged will continue demanding water shares while their lands are being drowned or acquired for the common good – or is it for the comfort of a few? While research continues to compile and explain so many facts on ruinous scenarios, should we join the chorus and ask: where has the water gone?

The Song



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