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Mapping Exclusion: Caste, Urbanisation, and the Politics of Dalit Water Access in Colonial Bombay (1860–1947)

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Abstract

This article examines the politics surrounding water supply for Dalit communities in the Bombay Presidency and city from 1860 to 1947. Although modern hydraulic systems were introduced from the 1860s in Bombay city, Dalit groups—including Mahars, Mangs, and Chamars— faced persistent discrimination. Among these, the Mahars especially were the most vocal in demanding their civic rights. Excluded from regular piped water, they relied on dipping wells, fountains, and standpipes. Even in the twentieth century, after the expansion of hydraulic schemes alongside suburban growth, Dalit access to clean drinking water remained restricted. Influenced by the social and sanitary reforms of the nineteenth century Dalits demanded access to clean water and housing. While the colonial government used sanitation schemes to distance Dalits from Gandhian influence, the Congress—under Gandhi—sought to retain their support in a bid to keep the Hindu community from falling apart during this high tide of nationalism. Although both presented themselves as champions of Dalit welfare, yet neither addressed the deeper caste barriers governing everyday access to water. Urban water supply for Dalits improved marginally over time, but their caste status did not. Based on unpublished archival records, this research article highlights a subject that has received lesser attention in existing scholarship on Bombay.

Keywords: Dalits, Bombay, water, caste, Congress, colonial

Introduction

Water supply, drainage and sewerage—key pillars of urban sanitation that function together—have a direct bearing on public health and the extent to which a municipal government provides these services is often taken as an indicator of a community's social progress. A study of the growth of these systems is important as it reveals the national as well as local socio-economic, political and administrative policies relating to urban growth. The phenomenal growth of these two services became the cause and consequence of speedy urbanisation of Bombay city in the nineteenth century—a period which witnessed rapid commercial and scientific developments, reclamations and construction of causeways transforming the original seven islands into a

single landmass. By 1849, this expanding urban centre had emerged as the capital city of western India with a population of 566,119 (Dossal 1991, 24).

In order to secure 'economic prosperity,' 'political stability' and a provide a semblance of 'modern civilisation' in the city, institutions such as the Bombay Agricultural society (1830), The Bombay Geographical Society (1831), the Bombay Medical and Physical society (1835) and the Bombay Mechanics' Institute (1847) were established. By the 1860s, Bombay had dramatically remodelled itself—from a fortified trading town into a pivotal Presidency capital that symbolised British colonial power and served as a crucial node in global commercial networks. Next only to New York and Liverpool in the scale of its cotton trade, and home to the largest cotton market in the world, the city experienced unprecedented economic and spatial change in this period, as the decade between 1860 and 1872 was marked by profound eco-demographic, spatial and infrastructural shifts.

The opening of the railways and the cotton boom, consequent to the American Civil war accelerated population growth[1] and industrial expansion. By 1872, the number of textile mills in the city rose to 15 (Michael 1902, 372). Its commercial confidence reflected further in the proliferation of financial and mercantile institutions.[2] These decisive urban changes initiated and accelerated irreversible sanitary developments in the city—the year 1860 marking a watershed with the establishment of the Vihar Water Works (VWW) in Salsette and the introduction of piped supply by the Municipality. Here onwards the city's dependence on traditional tanks and wells began to wane.

Although the broader history of Bombay city's sanitary history has received some scholarly attention, the experiences of untouchable classes vis a vis water supply, remain largely unexamined. Since the Dalit communities[3] were imagined primarily as 'filthy ones,' their neighbourhoods were not seen as legitimate sites for investment in clean water infrastructure. It was this notion that shaped the spatial and social distribution of water in colonial Bombay, reproducing caste hierarchies even within its apparent modern municipal systems (Mirza 2018, 81). The author of this article foregrounds this sanitary marginalisation and argues further that the VWW simultaneously operated as a socio-material equalizer—supporting the outcastes' struggle for dignity and inclusion by unfolding new aspirations for improved sanitation and a better quality of life.

1. The Right to Water

Bombay city's sanitation was based on cheap labour recruited on the basis of existing caste structures, where cleaning was a traditionally hereditary occupation performed by castes such as Dheds, Mahars, Mangs, and Bhangis. Therefore, the colonial Bombay municipality absorbed existing caste practices (Mirza 2018, 81). Spread everywhere in the city, but predominantly in the F and G wards, they were treated badly even by the Muslims in their daily lives, (Home Department Special [HDSFN], 1928, File No. 355(64) III; Bombay Chronicle, 1932, S-195) and described as "filthy" by the British administrators. Their unsuitable and unhygienic living conditions made them particularly susceptible to high mortality (Municipal Commissioner,

1879, 282)—the locality of Kamathipura exemplifying these conditions. Hindu outcastes[4] suffered acute water deprivation as well, denied as they were water from traditional sources.

It was in this landscape of exclusion that the Mahars who lacked an independent respectable livelihood and were compelled to serve others—unlike the Chambhars/Chamars who retained their caste-based profession of making leather goods—manifested greater organisation, and aware of their subordinate status displayed responsiveness to modern colonial schemes promising upliftment. Other outcaste groups remained too marginalised—socially and educationally—to engage meaningfully with emancipatory efforts (Pradhan 1938, 8–9). Predictably, it was the Mahar inhabitants of Bombay who complained in 1856, about prohibition from using the city's public wells and reservoirs. Government's characteristic response that while it could not interfere in their favour as regards the wells vested in the Municipality, Mahars were at liberty to use all those that belonged to the former (Report on the Administration of Public Affairs, 1855–1856, 39), was followed by complete inaction in reality.

Despite the inauguration of VWW, supply to these communities was restricted to standpipes or roadside fountains. Denied access to the modern infrastructure and unfamiliar with the idea of public property, they rejoiced when pipes burst, (Bombay Gazette, April 5, 1859, 322) while eagerly collecting water from leaking hydrants in the town, which they also often tried to prise open to draw water with the help of hollow bamboos (Bombay Gazette, June 6, 1859, 531). Faced with hardships during the water scarcity of 1859, the undeterred community again petitioned to access Vihar water near Mazagaon Castle, (General Department [GD], 1859, Vol. 65, Petition to Lord Elphinstone, 1–3) mistaking a fire plug for a fountain.

Yet again, Government's assurance to consider their needs and reiteration of their right to use public wells—with recourse to magistrates if obstructed (GD, 1859, Vol. 65, s-17)—was paralleled with a rising concern about their increasing numbers—8.4 percent of the population in the city (Chaudhari 1986, 271)—culminating in a warning to the Municipality to be more 'vigilant' against this 'insanitary class' (Memorandum of the Army Sanitary Commission 1881, 274). Further, unwilling to upset the social traditions of the country, Government allowed construction of separate wells for the lower castes right up till the 1880s.[5] Access to water therefore symbolised emancipation.

The social awakening of the nineteenth century among the depressed classes[6] (DC) of the country and the British attempt at decennial classification of castes from the 1901 census onwards resulted in the rise of caste consciousness and solidarity (Sarkar 1983, 55). The Hiraman Dhondi Mochi case of 1914 illustrates a rising consciousness of the right to water, as the court's decision made clear that access to shared water sources could not be denied on caste grounds[7] (Roy 2022). This awareness soon developed into protests against the practice of untouchability as well as the term itself and culminated in a call for its abolition in 1918 in the Untouchability Manifesto of the First All India Depressed Classes Conference—a demand, reckoned essential for *Swaraj* (Self-Rule) by Gandhi (Majumdar 1960, 1002–03).

As, the issues of the outcastes assumed a pan India significance with the Montague Chelmsford reforms of 1919—which provided an opportunity to the former to represent themselves in governing bodies—they sought socio economic amelioration through representation in the Bombay Legislative Council (BLC) and also demanded legislation for the removal of their civil disabilities—particularly their housing problem in industrial centres such as Bombay (Government of India, [GOI] 1920, GD Compilation No. 61, 1–5). Bombay city thus turned into a site of assertion witnessing an independent movement under the guidance of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, their first graduate (Sarkar 1983, 243) with a similar agenda.

Despite growing local mobilisation—particularly among the Mahars—the colonial government remained cautious, deferring social reform to Hindu society and avoiding legislative action on housing, citing ongoing discussions in Bombay. Its engagement was limited to education, (GD Comp. 61/1920, Note 29G, 19 Jan, 19). In 1923, the Bombay Government mandated that publicly funded schools admit children from the DC or lose grants (Indian Social Reformer 1926, 778). These discussions and interventions contributed to gaugeable social change, mirrored in the increase of pupils from the DC by 3,700, bringing their total to nearly 42,000 (Government of Bombay 1924, 211). A 1926 resolution, based on social reformer S. K. Bole's Bill, further warned municipalities that discretionary grants would be reduced if access to public amenities like wells and *dharmashalas* was denied to these communities (Indian Social Reformer 1926, 786).

These reforms prompted the Mahar community of Kalina near Kurla, led by Ramchandra Balaram Deolekar, to formally appeal to the Government on December 15, 1926, for the provision of at least two water taps, citing the acute inadequacy of a single well serving the entire Maharwada (PWD DD S-19/15, Deolekar to Collector, 31 Dec 1926, 3). It was easy for the Bombay Government to comply with the demand, since the connection could be taken from the Military Department's main lying idle since 1922. A tap was sanctioned for the Mahars in the name of their representative, Mr. Deolekar, but only under extremely restrictive conditions granting the Bombay Development Department (BDD) the right to cut off the tap whenever it required the land, thereby terminating all future piped supply and cancelling the entire arrangement. It could also, at its sole discretion, shift the tap to any other location on its own land or elsewhere (PWD DD S-19/15, U.O.R S.B. 862, 10 Sept 1927, 21–23).

Similar sympathy however was not shown to the DC of Khar many of whom, employed by the BDD, also suffered tremendously on account of paucity of water and high rates (Rajah, 1928, as cited in PWD DD 1928–29, S-19/1 Pt. II, 56). Denying this claim the BDD asserted that the few coolies who lived in Khar were apparently supplied water from a tap—but one which was kept under lock and key so that no outsiders could take water from it. The responsibility of the provision of water to this class was therefore placed on the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) (Government of Bombay, 1928, as cited in PWD DD 1928–29, S-19/1 Pt. II, 60).

The debates on water rights moved into the arena of sanitary housing as well. Though cooperative housing was being encouraged at this time, Government abandoned the DC to their own means in the matter. Members of the Imperial Council categorically maintained that such

schemes were not framed with special reference to the needs of the latter and that developments under consideration in Bombay, Calcutta, and United Provinces would automatically ameliorate their lot (Government of Bombay, 1920, as cited in GD Compilation 31 of 1920, 5). However, chawls built at this time by the City of Bombay Improvement Trust (CBIT) reinforced segregation, (Times of India, 1929, as cited in Home Department Special, File No. 355(64) III of 1928, S-81) and refused to provide adequate water-closets and taps. Thus, these densely occupied chawls remained generally filthy and dirty. High operational costs prevented the upgradation of Kamathipura by the Trust, and the latter also was left to the Municipality (CBIT,1929, 293-94). A similar scenario prevailed in the Dharavi scheme (CBIT, 1929, 529) where shortages forced people to take water even from the water closets.

The DC, long ignored by the Indian National Congress (INC) until now, suddenly became the cynosure of its attention in the post-World War I political scenario. The growing demand for social reform, sanitation, social service, education, and industrial development and the alienation of the Muslims due to the grant of separate electorates forced an anxious Congress, in 1917, in the wake of the famous Montague declaration, to pass a resolution urging the people of India to remove all disabilities imposed upon the DC (Bhartiya Vidya Bhawan, Vol. XI, 2003, 1002–03). Here onwards, conferences organized by the INC, articulated the need to remove the stigma of untouchability attached to the former and emphasised the responsibility of the government to provide special facilities for education and equal opportunities for employment to both them and the backward classes. Reformers highlighted that the long-standing treatment of the DC was a serious stigma upon Hindu society, noting that nearly six crores of people continued to be regarded as less than human (Bombay Provincial Conference 1922, 3).

1.2 Hydraulic Egalitarianism

The struggle over water and housing issues soon resonated with Bombay's municipal politics. In 1922, with the entry of the Nationalist Municipal Party (NMP) consisting of V. J. Patel, Sarojini Naidu, M. S. Aney and B. G. Horniman belonging to the Congress, civic administration of the city began to reflect the aspirations of the people (Sharma & Jangam, 1962, 45–47). Pledged to the Congress programme of eradication of untouchability, the NMP, prevailed upon the BMC to pass a resolution that caste distinctions would not be observed in the provision of drinking water pots in municipal schools, thereby reversing its previous policy of provision of separate pots of drinking water for the untouchables.

Enraged at the violation of Hindu traditions, *Sanatanists* (orthodox elements) called upon the BMC to rescind the resolution while corporators such as Dr. Javle, Mr. Mohanlal Desai, Mr. Ramchandra Bhat and Mr. Mantri, refused to send their children to school till corrective action was taken by the Corporation. They even threatened to institute proceedings against the latter. At the Bombay Stock Exchange, they risked worldwide disrepute by expressing resentment over the issue and requested the Exchange to close its daily transactions resulting in a notice requesting members to cease trading that day as a protest (HDSFN, 355(64) III 1928, S43-S47). Bombay Market remained closed as a mark of protest on the October 17, 1928 (Times of India, October 18, 1928, 8). As a counter measure, a meeting organised at

Dadar congratulated the BMC for its work. Emerging as a prominent advocate for the rights of the untouchables eminent lawyer Mr. V. N. Chandavarkar lent his support to the Corporation's initiative, even as the Hindu Mahasabha faced criticism for its silence in the face of the *Sanatanists'* opposition (HDSFN, 355(64) III 1928, S43-S47). This period therefore saw for the first time the materialisation of a discourse on the rights of the untouchables.

Emboldened by these developments, and the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927—the "foundational movement of the untouchable campaign"—(Omvedt, 1976, 222) the Social Conference of Untouchables of the Belgaum District passed a resolution on March 23, 1929, requesting Government to not only penalize the use of the word *untouchables* for the Mahar community but also to throw open all temples, wells, conveyances, and hotels to them. Inspired by the advance made by the Muslims, they too demanded separate electorates (HDSFN, 355(64) III 1928, 57–59).

This assertiveness found keener expression in Bombay, where leaders spoke candidly of equality in all spheres of social life—including inter-dining and inter-marriage. Some activists recognised conversion to Islam as a deliberate strategy to shame orthodox Hindus into reform. Legal remedies were consequently explored, with prominent jurists such as M. R. Jayakar arguing that Courts could support social reform. Parallelly, legislative solutions were proposed on the model of the earlier Caste Disabilities Removal Act, and Jayakar even drafted a bill for introduction in the Legislative Assembly. Together, these developments reveal a period in which social protest, legal argument, and legislative initiative converged to challenge the entrenched structures of caste exclusion (Anti-Untouchability Sub-Committee 1929, 2–4). Against this backdrop the 1929 Anti-untouchability Bill drafted by Ambedkar, among other things, provided for the removal of disabilities of the untouchable classes in the use of public conveniences like public wells or services like tramcars, buses etc. (HDSFN, 355(64) III 1928, S91–S93).

Further, in a bid to appease the DC, the Anti-Untouchability Sub-Committee of the Congress appointed on March 29, 1929, consisting of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Jamnalal Bajaj, commenced work in Bombay, with a programme for getting temples wells and schools, freely opened to untouchables and instructing them in sanitary living. Special meetings held in Bombay hereafter saw Pandit Malaviya speak on the temple-entry question exhorting the caste Hindus to freely admit the so-called untouchables in all Hindu temples (Anti-Untouchability Sub-Committee 1929, 1). Appeals to the people to throw open all public drinking water wells to the so-called untouchables (HDSFN, 355(64) III, 1928, 28 /05/1929, 77) were followed by fixing *Kartiki Ekadashi* as the day to mark the extinction of untouchability (HDSFN 355(64) III 1928, 1929, S-81) even as the municipality was urged to place sign boards at public wells as "open to all" and to make no distinction of caste in the letting of chawls (HDSFN 355(64) III 1928, BC, 12/12/29, 101).

These overtures notwithstanding, Congress could not contain the growing assertion of the DCs, whose political direction was now shaped by Ambedkar who advocated separate electorates at the 1930 Round Table Conference to resolve all their issues. Eager for representation in the legislature, to alleviate their position, the DC at this point had to choose

between separate electorates or joint ones with reserved seats—an issue on which they were not united. Joint electorates were opposed by the DCs because many feared that only those DC candidates acceptable to upper-caste Hindus would be elected. Ambedkar therefore supported separate electorates, and unlike several contemporaries, sharply criticised the British for the poverty of the DC, arguing that their policy of social non-interference had denied untouchables even basic rights like access to water (HDSFN 143-E II, 1930, M23-M29).

By 1932, the community stood divided between the Raja–Moonje group favouring joint electorates and Ambedkar's camp demanding separate ones. These debates spread nationwide, prompting the Swami Shraddhanand Trust to declare July 17, 1932 as Anti-Untouchability Day, urging the opening of all public wells and temples to all Hindus and organising inter-caste dinners—while simultaneously condemning Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates and endorsing the Raja–Moonje Pact[8] (HDSFN 355(64) III, 1928, Times of India, June 20, 1932, S-223).

However, in a swift turn of events, the Communal Award of August 16, 1932— which granted separate electorates to minorities, including the DC—was replaced by the Poona Pact, due to the stiff opposition by Gandhi, thus trading the separate electorates with reserved seats. From this time Gandhi's term Harijan gained popularity while he involved himself with their upliftment. Interestingly, the outcastes viewed the label with derision saying, "Harijan means what we can never be allowed to become by the caste Hindu, and what we may not want to be anyway. It was a superficial way for Gandhi to resolve his guilt." (Guha, 2017).

2. Well Programme, the Sangh and Sanatanists

One of the direct outcomes of the Poona Pact was the formation of the All-India Anti Untouchability League on September 30, 1932, when a public meeting of Hindus held at the Sir Cowasjee Jahangir Hall in Bombay city, considered the desirability of taking immediate steps to implement the Pact. One of the major areas in which the League was to work was the social and economic improvement of the untouchables. It therefore aimed at the removal of the bars in civic matters which "operate to the detriment of the downtrodden section of our people."

The League was to engage with the caste Hindus as well as untouchables (HDSFN 800(40) (12) B, 1932, 6–7). Working under the chairmanship of Pandit Malaviya with industrialist Mr. G. D. Birla as the President and social worker Mr. A. V. Thakkar, its General Secretary, it was to carry out propaganda against untouchability via opening of public wells, temple entry, *dharmashalas* etc. The League first renamed The Servants of Untouchables Society and subsequently the Harijan Sevak Sangh (HSS) by Gandhi, (Venkataraman, n.d., 212) which had among its other members politician and activist B. Kellappan, lawyer and activist C. Rajagopalachari and Mrs. Kasturba Gandhi (Home Special [HS]1933 800(40) AA I, M13). Supported by leaders like M. C. Rajah, Birla, Malviya, Jayakar and Rajaji, September 20 was declared as a day of national fasting, with temples opened and services extended to the DC and the week from September 27 to October 2 declared as the Untouchability Abolition Week, (Venkataraman, n.d., 211). This was marked by symbolic acts such as public well access

in Kedgaon, Pune District (Bombay Chronicle, [BC] 4 January 1932, 2) and opening of a hospital and waterworks for untouchables by the Nizam in Nanded (BC, 11 April 1933, 10).

Anti-untouchability sub committees, also formed in the expanding Bombay Suburban Division (BSD) by the District Congress Committee, consisting of Rati Lal Nanji Desai of Vile Parle, Dr. Prabhavati N. Pandit, S. M. Parmanand, Dr. Narayan Damodar Savarkar, B. G. Kher of Khar and Purushottam Kanji of Santacruz, however could not make much headway (HDSFN 355(64) III, 1928, S 131). Responding to Gandhi's stance, they were unwilling to take any coercive action against orthodox Hindus and wished to win them over with persuasion (HDSFN 355(64) III, 1928, BC, 24/9/31, S-137). Their programmes thus remained confined to opening of libraries and night schools.

Though 1932 witnessed attempts at removal of any disability from the untouchables—particularly with regard to their entry to the local bodies was concerned—no attempt was made to abolish untouchability. Post 1932, only efforts at social inclusion via opening of wells and temple entry were made. Despite opposing untouchability, Gandhi and much of the reform movement still operated within a caste-based framework, while his expectations centred on internal reform among Harijans, with cleanliness and hygiene as a primary focus—necessitating access to water [9]. For this he urged Hindus to cooperate by opening private wells. Ambedkar, in contrast, rejected such caste-preserving gestures and demanded the abolition of untouchability while advocating for equal access to public wells, framing water not as charity but as an economic right (Indian Social Reformer, 22nd June 1932, 119).

Bombay celebrated its second Harijan Day on April 30, 1933. Female members of the Gandhi Seva Sena went about in a motor lorry distributing leaflets advising people to work for the removal of untouchability. Harijan boys collected funds for the same cause and clothes and sweets were also distributed to the children of the DC **(**HS 1933 800(40) AA II, M291). Meetings were held at Santa Cruz, Andheri, Mulund, and Bandra. A night school was opened at Bandra for Harijan children **(**HS, 1933, 800(40) AA I, M303). The propaganda for temple entry of the DC resulted in the opening of a dozen small temples in the city. But the largest and the richest temples, such as Madhav Baug, Babulnath, and Bhuleshwar still shut their doors to the untouchables. The BMC passed a resolution allowing the cremation of the untouchables on the Hindu Burning and Burial Grounds at Queens' road (HS, 1933, 800(40) AA II, M69-71). Harijan Days were similarly observed in multiple cities across the country at Lahore, Benaras, Ahemedabad, and Karachi, focusing on symbolic acts, welfare efforts and appeals for temple-entry reform. However, police intervention in the same clearly manifested that they operated under colonial control (Bombay Chronicle, May 2, 1933, 12).

Access to water had assumed such importance at this stage that 300 untouchables converted to Islam in Belgaum, in the Bombay Presidency, when a ban was imposed by caste Hindus against the use of public wells by the former community (HDSFN, 355(64) III, 1928, S-145). Therefore, one of the avowed agendas of the HSS was the opening of public wells. It facilitated water supply to the untouchables by sinking new wells, installing tube wells and pumps for their use, repairing old ones and persuading local governments and bodies to sink

and repair wells for them (Majumdar, 1960, 1009). The J. K. Pani Fund was started by the HSS in June 1933, for the improvement of water supply in Harijan *bastis*, but it faced a paucity of funds as a result of which Provincial Boards could not do much effective work (Indian Social Reformer, June 8, 1935, 651). Fervent appeals by Mr. G. D. Birla failed to galvanize public sympathies or raise funds for building wells for the DC as the unsympathetic caste Hindu community, was far more moved by the cause of the Quetta earthquake victims than the plight of the untouchables (Indian Social Reformer, 29th June 1935, 690-91).

In 1934–35, the HSS was able to open only 16 wells! More was done by way of sinking wells or repairing old ones (Indian Social Reformer, April 4, 1936, 490). The HSS, by its own admission, was more effective in education than in practical reform. Financially dependent on sympathetic donors and its frugal General Secretary, it expanded into a sprawling bureaucracy with 26 Provincial Boards and 179 District Committees delivering little impact! Its efforts to address untouchability—especially through water access—failed to resonate with a largely indifferent public (Indian Social Reformer, April 20, 1935, 536).

Even as the HSS faltered in its programme, greater resistance was engineered by the *Sanatanists* of Bombay towards the introduction of the Untouchability Abolition Act— to be applied to the whole of British India —by activist and social reformer, Mr. C. S. Ranga Aiyyar in the Legislative Council in 1933 (Indian Social Reformer, January 21, 1933, 331). In a meeting at Hira Bagh, C. P. Tank they demanded the inclusion in the new constitution of a clear and unequivocal clause prohibiting legislative interference in religious matters **(**HS, 1933, 800(40) AA II, M 147) and appealed to the government to protect the sanctity of the Hindu temples. Gandhi's Harijan upliftment work and "fast stunts" were regarded as experiments to catch the attention of the people while his Harijan mission was welcomed as a measure which would split the Congress. Gandhi, at this juncture, stood discredited both among the Congressmen and the Harijans! (HDFSN.800 (40) (II) C, 1933, 1933, 237).

3. On the Fence

Government, in an attempt to appear progressive, shrewdly resorted to a word changing exercise. In 1930, the label untouchables, being considered offensive was substituted by the term Depressed Classes, who from then onwards were nested under the Backward Classes category (BC). (HS, 1933, 800(40) AA II, M357). Henceforth, the BC were further subdivided into DC—to consist exclusively of untouchables, Aboriginal and Hill tribes and Other Backward Classes (Indian Social Reformer, June 24, 1933, 683).

As a further palliative, in 1931, the Backward Classes Board was founded with the primary agenda of considering questions such as the use of wells and tanks, *dharmasalas*, education and other matters that affected the community (HDSFN, 355(64) III 1928, S-179). A subsequent Act of the Legislature introduced revised nomenclatures of Intermediate and Scheduled Classes for Backward and Depressed Classes as it was felt that the terms Backward and Depressed were not suitable in describing the classes concerned (Administration Report, 1934-35, 6).

However, since the Government policy of shunning the movement completely and preventing its servants from taking part in it aroused the suspicion of the people, as an act of caution, the Backward Classes Officer (BCO) advised cooperation with the HSS as far as possible (HDSFN 800(40) (12) B, 1932, 1). Government directives strongly prescribed that grants to the Local Boards for the improvement of the village water supply would be subject to the condition that these would be available for the use of all classes and castes equally, to guarantee equality of access to water. Local Boards were also called upon in 1933 to put up notices, on 20 percent of their wells, to the effect that these were open to all castes and classes. By a later mandate such notices were to be retained permanently (General Department File No. [GDFN]. 453/33- I 1934, 51-57). The hollowness of these measures was visible in the statistics of 1934 when of the 115 public wells of the BSD only two were opened for the DC! (GDFN 453/33- I 1934, 4).

Marginalised, denied access to water, and left without public support, the DC remained vulnerable to everyday intimidation. Their cause was taken up by R. R. Bakhle of the BLC, who on March 16, 1934, introduced a pioneering bill to guarantee equal treatment for all classes in the use of publicly funded wells, tanks, taps, *dharmashalas* and similar facilities. Bill No. XI of 1934 (A Bill to Remove Certain Disabilities and Inconveniences of The Depressed Classes) with a penal provision of a fine not exceeding Rs. 50 in the first instance and Rs. 100 along with imprisonment in the second instance, (HS 800 (40) (7) 1933, M81-82) attempted to place responsibility on the Government in the area of social action by giving legal protection to the DC. But it failed in the face of opposition by all classes—including the Christians, Muslims and supporters of the Harijan movement—who regarded it as superfluous and ineffective and apprehended its potential use as a deadly weapon by the Harijans.

Unsympathetic British members delegitimised the problems of the DC saying that they, "traded in their sores" and the last thing they wanted was these to be healed. Needless to say, it was thrown out (Indian Social Reformer, October 6, 1934, 84–85). Members of the BLC even asserted that the DC were fairly treated at least in the city without the fear of boycott, and that they worked together with other class workers harmoniously. The problem was apparently faced in the mofussil, especially in the villages and the taluka towns (BLC Debates, 1934, Vol. XL, 1326)[10].

This development seriously imperilled the Government's position. Many felt that the Government ideal of common schools and wells, aimed at abolishing untouchability, were in fact a convenient ground for avoiding expenditure of money—an idea which gained traction with the rejection of Mr. Bakhle's bill in the Council. Fearful, that such perceptions would result in the loss of "loyal subjects, as well as faithful (and ill paid servants)" and with overtures on the part of Gandhi to win their sympathy, Government was compelled to make a gesture that it was "prepared to spend money towards satisfying one of the Depressed Classes" most crying needs **(**GDFN 453/33- I 1934, 91-95). In a classic case of colonial paternalism, a sum of at Rs. 1 lakh was suggested to improve their water supply status (GDFN. 453/33- I 1934, 83). However, driven as always by its financial compulsions, the amount of Rs. 25000 was considered adequate for the creation of additional wells which "would also create a more

favourable impression on the minds of the Depressed Classes," provided of course if the DC supplied free labour! (GDFN 453/33- I 1934, 120-121) Ultimately only Rs. 10,000 were sanctioned (GDFN 453/33- I 1934, 143). Having been allotted a sum of Rs. 918 only in 1936, and which the BSD claimed to have spent in entirety, no further increase was contemplated in this division.

In the other the District Local Boards and municipalities of the Northern division, this work was not taken up at all **(**GDFN 453/33- I 1934, 187). In the BSD, two wells were constructed at Marwa and Rathodi (GDFN 453/33- I 1934, 195). With this accomplished it now claimed to have met long-standing village needs, especially those of the untouchables, whose interests it said were 'safeguarded' through periodic orders. The earlier provisions were now augmented by instructions requiring touring officers to check whether the former were allowed to use public wells and tanks, and to intervene informally if they were not (Backward Class Dept. Report, 1940, 16). It still however avoided confrontation with caste Hindus by expressly mentioning "that executive or legal action alone is insufficient to prevent caste Hindus from employing social boycott and other forms of harassments against these castes for asserting their civic rights in such matters and that enlightened public opinion and active support and cooperation from the institutions working for the uplift of these classes and from social workers are essential to achieve the object in view" (Annual Report 1937–38, 1939, 11).

The Government then cleverly manipulated the Sangh's well-building programme when the latter sought information on the villages in which it proposed to sink wells, ostensibly to avoid duplication of effort. The BCO was therefore advised cooperation with the HSS if the latter sought help. However, Government was at pains to portray the impression that they sincerely wished the welfare of the DC and had been committed to it long before the Congress came into the field. "The credit of ameliorating their condition has gone to Government and not to Congress." (HS, 800(40) AA IV 1935, 109-110). Ameliorative measures for the DC were therefore caught between institutional rivalry with both the HSS and Government posing as their benefactors.

4. Exhaustion and Aftermath

Obviously, all such sops failed! But not only due to the meagreness of funds or political will. The use of the anti-untouchability campaign itself as an election stunt by some influential members to gain a foot hold in the Legislative Council and the unfortunate internal prejudices among the DC were also in no small measure responsible for this. As early as 1933, the *Times of India* labelled it as a dead struggle as Gandhi apparently abandoned it for the pursuit of civil disobedience. Nor did the members of the Assembly seem particularly interested in it (HDSFN 800 (40) (II) C 1933, 223).

Water supply, continued to elude the DC since the gesture of throwing open of wells happened only in times of emergencies such as the Gandhian movement. As soon as the movement ceased, the privileges were withdrawn. By 1939, though the Government claimed that all public wells were open to the so-called Harijans, yet enforcement was almost non-existent. Ceremonial opening of wells meant little, for faced with intimidation and violence

from caste Hindus, no Harijan could safely testify, and the blame was quietly shifted onto them instead. Mr. Kher opined that Harijans "are thus perversely holding up their own 'uplift' by not 'asserting their rights' and not coming forward to give evidence in such cases" (Sanjana 1946, 39).

Having realised that they were being treated as political pawns, the DC looked at other alternatives for bettering their lot and began considering conversion—championed by Ambedkar—which seemed more popular than others such as separate electorates, social reform and abolition of untouchability. Electoral wins however brought a measure of relief. The 1937 elections to the BLC proved more gratifying as two Scheduled Castes[11] representatives Vishram Gangadhar Savadkar and Gangadhar Ragharam Ghatge both representatives of Dr. Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party (Suradkar 2013, 23), won the elections along with the Congress which emerged as the single largest party.

Congress ministries formed subsequently attempted to safeguard the interests of the SCs especially regarding the use of public wells. Officers were instructed to take strict action against anyone preventing SCs from accessing public wells. Deterrent measures included penalizing those who contaminated SC drinking water, withholding grants from non-compliant local bodies, and even superseding them if they failed to open wells and tanks to all communities (The Bombay Government and Its Work, 1938, 20). As regards housing, prolonged negotiations resulted in the finalisation of a scheme in 1936 which supported by the then Revenue Minister Morarji Desai, climaxed in the establishment of a housing society on May 22, 1939. The Corporation as usual was charged with the arrangement for essential civic amenities, including water supply, roads and lighting (Indian Social Reformer, May 27, 1939, 615).

Conclusion

The demand for water in an urbanising Bombay was in itself a forerunner of the larger anti-untouchability movement. The struggle over access to public wells and tanks—sharpened significantly by the Vihar water supply—exposed the everyday violence of caste in a rapidly modernizing city. It was this conflict, embedded in the basic right to water, that presaged and helped catalyse the broader campaign for dignity, equality and the abolition of untouchability though the anti-untouchability campaign itself faced major challenges. Although the occupational vulnerability of the Mahars made them more open to government development programmes as compared to the other backward classes, internal divisions among the latter, political opportunism, and resistance from orthodox Hindus came in the way of their social and economic progress.

Ultimately, some legal progress was achieved in 1946 with the Bombay Harijan (Removal of Social Disabilities) Act and the Temple Entry Act, which made untouchability a punishable offence (Bombay–1951–52, 94). But even though it guaranteed equal access to public water sources in the Bombay city and imposed fines and imprisonment for violations, (Bombay Act No. X of 1947, 1954, 2351–2353), it was essentially reactive in nature and only indicated a shift from symbolic reform to enforceable rights. The movement itself failed to dent the caste system as neither the Government nor the Congress under Gandhi were interested in

dealing with the crucial issue. Urban modernity therefore complicated the caste structure. Even as it compelled certain concessions to the outcastes in the form of grudging access to water and housing, it simultaneously reinforced and stabilized existing caste configurations.

Endnotes

[1] The first section of the BB&CI Railway opened in 1860, and by 1864 the Ahmedabad, Broach, and southern lines were operational, while the American Civil War (1861–65) further fuelled Bombay's rise, driving cotton exports to nearly ten times their earlier average and reaching a value of £30 million by 1864–65.

[2] By 1864 the city housed 31 banks, 16 financial associations, 8 land companies, 16 press companies, 10 shipping companies, 20 insurance companies, and 62 joint-stock companies, where virtually none had existed a decade earlier. The cotton boom also spurred large-scale migration; by 1865, ten mills employed over 6,500 workers, (Dwivedi 2001, 85–86).

[3] The article uses the terms Dalits, Depressed Classes, Harijans, Scheduled Castes, outcastes, and untouchables as they were applied in different periods. The historical shifts in their meaning and usage are explained within the text.

[4] According to Enthoven, the Mhars were an assembly of Tribal units which had much in common with the Kolis, Bhois, Ramoshis, Katkaris and Bedars. The Dheds, Parvaris and the Dombs also belonged to the Mahar category (Enthoven 1922, 401).

[5] Concentrated in areas like Kamathipura, Tardeo and Byculla, the numbers of the Mahar, Dhed and Holiya population of the city had increased from 57855 in 1911 to 92,481 in 1921 (Census of India, 1921, Vol. IX, p. 30) In 1931 their number stood at 104,977 (Pradhan 1938, 2).

[6] It is not known precisely by whom, when and where this term, 'Depressed Classes,' was first used. However, most probably, it originated in Madras and began to be commonly used in the writings of the social reformers in the first decade of the twentieth century. The term found its way in the government officials sometime in the nineteenth century, but it gained currency in official usage only towards the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century (Raza 2014, 7). B. R. Ambedkar preferred to call his people either 'Untouchables' or the 'Depressed Classes', the latter a legal category in British India. 'Dalit', was used in parts of Northern India from the late 19th century, it only gained wider currency in the 1970s, following its adoption by a group of radical activists in Maharashtra who called themselves the Dalit Panthers. Gandhi used the term Antyaja, later replaced by Harijan (Guha, 2017).

[7] In 1914, Hiraman Dhondi Mochi, an "untouchable" leatherworker, was prosecuted for drawing water from a sacred lake attached to a Bombay-area temple. His conviction for "insult to religion" was reversed on appeal, where judges ruled that ordinary use of shared water sources could not be treated as religious desecration. This case clearly highlighted that traditional exclusion could no longer work in a city like Bombay with its expanding urban frontiers (Roy 2022).

[8] It was an agreement between Dalit leader M.C. Rajah and the Hindu Mahasabha leader B.S. Moonje, supporting joint electorates with reserved seats for the DC as opposed to Ambedkar's idea of separate electorates.

[9] The other internal reforms expected were- Improved methods of carrying on what are known as unclean occupations, e. g., scavenging and tanning; The giving up of carrion and beef if not meat altogether; Giving up of intoxicating liquors; Inducing parents to send their children to day schools wherever they are available, and parents themselves to attend night schools wherever such are opened; Abolition of untouchability among themselves (ISR 19th November 1932, 187–188).

[10] As noted by Tirthankar Roy, the water access campaign for the untouchables was more successful in urban areas, where piped water and public distribution systems weakened caste-based control while the persistence of private ownership in rural areas continued to reinforce social exclusion it lagged (Roy 2022).

[11] The Government of India Act 1935 gave politico legal currency to the term Scheduled Castes.

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