

# **EXPLORATION OF DALIT ENVIRONMENTALISM IN INDIA**

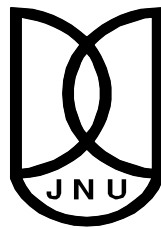
*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University*

*in partial fulfillment of the requirements*

*for the award of the degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**CENTRE FOR POLITICAL STUDIES**

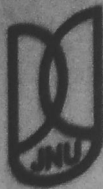
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**DECLARATION**

I, Saripalli V Ravikiran, hereby declare that the dissertation entitled "EXPLORATION OF DALIT ENVIRONMENTALISM IN INDIA" submitted by me for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** is my bona fide work and that it has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any degree or diploma of this university or any other university.

*C. V. Ravikiran*  
(Saripalli V Ravikiran)

**CERTIFICATE**

It is hereby recommended that the dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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*Dedicated to my Parents*

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# Chapter I

## 1.1 Introduction

Environmental discourses have rarely brought Nature and Caste together for an examination. The deeper interface is often undermined by understanding caste as constructed, distinct and socio-historical component specific to India and embedded in deep rooted hierarchies, and by considering nature as natural, common, and inherent. However, it is often believed by many caste Hindus that the nature and caste structure with the same origin, are organic, intrinsic, and natural. In contrast, we find scholars that, both caste and other natural elements like land, water, and forest are products of society and history.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars opine: “from the times of the *Rig-Veda* - ‘naturalizing’ an unequal social order –to the recent debates on caste , dimensions and determinants of human behaviors and nature have often met through diverse paths, times, and spheres”.<sup>2</sup> The interface between caste and nature: claims and proclaims specific mode of cultural manifestations; validates and invalidates places, spaces, and people; generates and consolidates social hierarchy; induces conflicts and violence and provides innovative contours for fighting against domination.

One has to understand the specificity between ‘Brahminized nature’ and universally accessible nature in the path of justice, or in terms of the freedom from the burdens of the caste. Caste burdens are identified in village sites, occupations, agricultural activities, food habits, water, land and irrigation, only to make the caste economy survive on the use and abuse of the nature and its resources.

We can also observe power working through nature where caste, by being a catalyst, often creates and consolidates the natural and the social power system. It is not uncommon for the powerful to exploit nature in multiple ways, only to establish and maintain politics of belonging and alienation, exclusion and inclusion. Social pollution and social ecology have always been the categories in the process of ecological ‘othering’, and in making the dirt and filth an existential component, and burdening the caste with water through touch *etc.*, of some sections of the society. Thus, power is flown

through interlocking of caste and nature. One of the scholars explain: “the diversity, multiplicity, durability and elasticity in the meaning of nature and environment and the historicity, complexity, peculiarity and disparity in theory and practice of caste in India are also bound together by the power and authority they have had in shaping human destiny”.<sup>3</sup>

Environmental historians of India have amply described how the British Raj entered nature and its resources, people and their lives through ‘centralized, bureaucratic, scientific and modern system of management and how it aroused discontents and struggles among people. Political ecologists have analyzed the importance of issues of ownership, access and availability of nature and its resources while also equally emphasizing on the functionality of the state, community and market. Unequal burdens (reflected in their alienation and displacement), imposed on people in the name of development and modernity have also been stressed by environmental activists. Critical questions have also been raised by feminists and anthropologists about the natural order’s inherent ‘naturalness’, to bring to light how power as layers, get exercised within gender, caste, and nature.<sup>4</sup>

However, social history of the nature, through the lens of caste is hardly analyzed, making meanings and implications of Dalits driven through the caste politics in the natural world, a blind spot. Eco-Brahminism, implies a demonstration of how caste loyalty and Brahmanical Hindu Ontology is translated into the ecological politics. Caste has significantly shaped: environmental attitude; appropriation and exploitation of resources; social ecology and cultural landscapes; social body and occupation.

In the second chapter, how Dalits question some of the major premises of ‘Eco-Brahminism’—translation of caste loyalty, Hindu Brahmanical Conservatism, and The Law of Karma into environmental politics -by underlining their environmental knowledge and experiences is explained.

In the third chapter, to understand the Dalit ecological worlds, I focused on rich sources of Dalit eco-literature—which includes poems, songs, stories, painting, music and folklore coming from diverse regions and communities. Dalits myths and legends like Mayabel and Jasma, Deena and Bhadri are employed to underline their dreams and desires for ecological belongings, against their suffering, sacrifice, and alienation. Equal emphasis has also been given to



Dalits' gods and goddesses, poojas and festivals through which they celebrate and demonstrate their ecological capacity and creativity to natural elements against all odds. Dalits follow a unique environmental ethics, and their ecological agency is intertwined with a concern for social justice. Though Dalits narratives may not be explicitly environmental but they are filled with eco-symbols like water, river, sea, and forest. Dalits tell us that earth, land, water, agriculture and forest are not just spaces or places but are also bound by structures of inclusion and exclusion based on touch, feel, and food through their historical, cultural, and social journeys. They also do not offer any single or simple answer about their relationship to the environment as it is a source of misery and joy, victimhood and celebration. Earth is alive and powerful imbibing the origin and meaning of life for some. For others it is an ancient god who has nurtured them for ages. But for many it is a wretched place that reminds them of slavery, bondage, and loss of life. Characterization of their relationship with animals and food reveal meaningful attachments to nature and outdoor. Dalit labor embedded land, water, cultivation and agriculture. Despite labor being their own it is marked by powers of caste and nature. Dalits see an element of pride in crops, though dispossessed of land, making cultivation a metaphor for celebration. Focusing on various environmental traditions of Dalits and their expressions in everyday lives, this chapter surveyed writings of several Dalit intellectuals of diverse backgrounds.

Is the language and the rhetoric on the environmental justice movement invoked only in the 1980s or can we locate such a language in Ambedkar's thought and struggles, or any other Dalit mythical and contemporary figures. If located, are there any instances in contemporary activism for environmental justice, where their legacy has been extended. As a response to these questions, Ambedkar's environmental visions (eco-Ambedkarism), Dalit ecological contestations around commons, contemporary environmental activism of Manjhi around a common which provides us with the conceptions of new commons, and eco-narrative of Una movement: symbolizing Dalits struggle for their land and extending the environmental legacy of Mahad Satyagraha, have been analyzed in the fourth chapter. And the next section in the same chapter, took up water, central to environmental paradigms, and narrated

how one specific aspect of human relationship with nature can be changed by caste, and how this particular caste discourse on a natural resource can encourage Dalits to articulate their own traditions. In other words, it examines the politics, availability, and ecology of water through caste. It shows how notions of untouchability, impurity, pollutants, and dirt drive the culture, institutions, and practices around water, which sustain deep inequalities and discrimination against Dalits. By seeing castes in water, Dalits interrogate the religion, cultures, institutions, practices, and policies that create inequalities within and between castes. Simultaneously, by interrogating caste division in water, Dalits and their organizations invoke their won symbols, histories and struggles on the ground, which unravel their distinct cultural politics of water, through case studies of GMA and Lok Shakti Sangathan (LSS), in two different locations of Bihar. This chapter also explores how water is not just a natural, given, source of life and death, but is also an institution, a social and cultural system, with specific meanings for Dalits. It examines how and why Dalits search for water rights gets allied to their historical memories, caste status, and cultural-religious icons like Ekalavya and Deena-Bhadri. It seeks to show how Dalits employ their water politics to question caste and the social and economic power of the upper caste.

This research complies with other scholars who used the term Dalit in a wider, inclusive sense (sometimes including boatmen and fisher folk) as the caste and nature interface impacts the body, self, presence, and position of the oppressed.

## Chapter II

### 2.1 Eco Brahmanism: The Caste and Nature Interface

It is of vital importance to understand the significant lines of environmental conceptions in India since the 1980s, paying critical attention to caste, and its expression or marginalization, in environmental discourses and also showing how Brahmanical religious traditions and their arguments have had a powerful resonance in India's dominant environmental leanings.

Ecology has begun to agitate people's hearts and minds, since 1970s, when the social and political worlds started understanding it as a comprehensive ideology and discipline and as an essential element of vital activities of modern civilization. Imperative has been, a thorough analysis of development from an ecological lens in the present context, as deterioration in human beings' natural environment due to industrialization, destruction of nature because of excessive pollution and growing economic activities, exhaustion of natural resources due to constant increase in demographic pressures, and elimination of several species of animals and plants have prompted people to question the very conception of rationality *vis-a-vis* nature. A philosophical comprehension of nature and culture has been urged by some environmentalists, who have reinvented caste, community, religion, and tradition in India to overcome the alarming signs of an ecological crisis, while simultaneously regarding Hindu religion and caste system as a key to the solution of economic problems. There are other environmentalists who have consistently disguised the implications of caste and religion for the environment. Mainstream Indian environmentalism, whether traditionally or functionally, translated caste loyalty and Hindu ontology into environmental politics only to embody eco-Brahmanism: a negation of the spirit of liberty, equality, and fraternity in the ecological domain, all of which are not entirely new, and have been a part of the Indian social life.

'Environmentalism of the poor', 'indigenous environmentalism', 'middle-class environmentalism', 'elite environmentalism', 'eco-feminism', 'red and green', 'green and saffron' have been various definitions of Indian environmental politics revealing its

diversity and dynamics. Voices and visions of women and tribals have been the particular focus of scholarship on environmental issues and movements, and debates on development. But, Dalits have been largely missing in most studies as a category as they are usually merged in the general definitions of poor, marginal, vulnerable, displaced, environmental refugees, migrants, in spite of their larger participation in significant numbers in various environmental movements, contributing to an apparent environmental blindness on questions of caste, or an understanding of a specifically Dalit position on ecological politics. Such a position, if taken into account can complicate our comprehension of environment and brings to light voices of dissent and difference.

Invisibilisation of Dalit issues in mainstream Indian environmentalism along with constructing an exclusive and partial environmental politics, which is often Brahmanical, Hindu, and conservative, and couching in a language of 'new caste' and 'new traditionalism'<sup>1</sup> have made few Dalits and anti-caste intellectuals questioning ecological and political trajectories of contemporary environmentalism in India. For instance, Gail Omvedt referred to the alienation between two of the most powerful social movements in India—the anti-caste movement and the environment movement in her 'Why Dalits Dislike Environmentalists.'<sup>2</sup> In another newspaper article, 'The New Life Movement versus Narmada Bachao Andolan, Chandrabhan Prasad invoked Ambedkar's notion of a New Life Movement, his ideas on modernization, and his critique of Gandhin traditionalism as arguments for a rejection of the 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' in general and of Medha Patkar in particular.<sup>3</sup> Referring to environmentalism as exclusive and devoid of any concerns and relationship with the builders of environment on earth, Kancha Ilaiah argues that this so-called secular environmentalism is not bothered about the nationalist and hegemonic social structure that Brahmanism has built.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, instances from various environment movements expose their caste blindness, more importantly, their implicit pro-caste and anti-Dalit biasedness. Though movements like Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Chilka Bachao Andolan attempted to provide a creative redefinition of human rights, linking their movements with rights to life and livelihood, but neglected Dalits and caste discrimination. By examining NBA, it was found, that still higher-caste domination was continuing in movement prone areas and villages along with caste discrimination seriously limiting Dalits

participation and their ability to confidently take part in decision making. However, there was no organizational support to fight for the issues of Dalits and the landless laborer's only to leave the local core-periphery structure in the campaign unaddressed and made caste domination and class division subsist.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars, through various case studies<sup>6</sup> of prominent environmental initiatives, have made us understand how caste prejudices are part of them. Taking up the Vrindavan Conservation Project, an initiative which was launched in the 1990s by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), India which has also become an on-going mission of *Hidutva* agenda in the name of the 'liberation of *Krishna Janmabhoomi*', explicitly aimed to restore Vrindavan's ecology through plantation of trees. Imagery of Krishna has been used for invoking the active participation of Hindus in the conservation project as a symbol of environmental purity and beauty.

This case study also reveals how the movement had intrinsic caste preconceptions when it defended the traditional methods of waste disposal, while also simultaneously invoking the *Manusmriti* as offering venerable injunctions on ancient and time-tested technologies of waste disposal,<sup>7</sup> where Dalits had to carry night soil (human excreta) on their heads and perform other related leaning jobs.

However, this case study also informs us how the cleanliness drive was stopped when the priests and the Krishna *bhakt*s [devotees] perceived Bhangis (a Scheduled Caste, mostly scavenger) as polluting whether it is the people, their ways, or the mandir (temple).

In second example<sup>8</sup>, the watershed management program in Ralegan Siddhi, launched under the leadership of Anna Hazare has been explored. As we have seen, the first initiative's linkages to Hindu culture, tradition, and religion, this movement too reveals certain prejudices vis-a-vis Dalits, along with its paternalistic, reformist, Gandhian, or Brahmanic language. This case study brings forth how Anna Hazare has tried to purify the Dalit's living, eating, and thinking habits through his practice of vegetarianism. In this context Anna Hazare has the following to say:

“We said that the society condemns you because your living is dirty, your food habits are dirty, and your thinking is dirty. Therefore, you have to change. With such constant hammering, the whole village turned vegetarian. The Dalits were also made vegetarian”.

This case study also tells us, how, despite Anna Hazare's efforts to remove the untouchability in common spaces like temples and wells and make the presence of Dalits visible in village festivals and functions but Dalits here often express their dissatisfaction with the movement, as they perceived the glaring distinctions in terms of caste-occupation marked development between Marathas and them.

Quoting Anna Hazare, "it was Mahatma Gandhi's vision that every village should have one Chamar, one Sunar, one Kumhar and so on. They should all do their work according to their role and occupation, and in this way, a village will be self-dependent. This is what we are practicing in Ralegan Siddhi, this case study tells us how Ralegan Siddhi positions Dalits in limited frameworks by tying them to their traditionally ascribed status and occupation, and maintains unequal possession of land and utilization of water, and exploitative labor relations.

This case study also exposed the assumptions, of the idea of Dalits' integration into an ideal village in Ralegan Siddhi, that they were always there to do some duties and required services and that it is this utility that justifies their existence today, which are hegemonic in nature and designed to bring Dalits into the Brahmanical realm not only through purification of the food and other habits but also through a dissemination of healthy *samskaras* (some significant sanctifying or purificatory Hindu rites) to their children, and finally by maintaining the centrality of the dominant caste through certain ritual practices like Vedic Hindu weddings in the temples of the village, temple prayers with devotional hymns, and *satvic* (pure) food in co-dining amidst Vedic mantras.

In Ralegan Siddhi, the scholar of this case study concludes, that "the position of Dalits is grounded not only in rituals or in a language of integration, but also in the concept of a united family, cemented by the continuous reference to religion, the centrality of the dominant caste, and the authority of an environmental leader

There are also studies on, the changing dynamics of the anti-Tehri Dam movement shifting proclamation of environmentalists, specifically Sunderlal Bahuguna and various other leaders of the movement, and the activeness of the Viswa- Hindu Parishad to involve in the politics of anti-dam. While examining how these two groups have evocated nature, religion, and nation, it argues: "that through a regular use of certain mythical beliefs and simplified dichotomies, there was an inadvertent collaboration between green

and saffron. The Tehri Dam became a means of combining sacredness with impulse, gravity of high politics with solemnity of daily worship, and nature with nationalism".<sup>9</sup>

There is another case study, on Sulabh international, a significant organization working for the rural development and sanitation which shows how an environmental initiative which is meant for the abolition of scavenging is couched in Hindu religious ecology. The author notes that the "liberation of scavengers, their social transformation, prevention of environment pollution, creation of non-conventional sources of energy, training people voluntary action and diffusion of innovations for promoting inexpensive and affordable indigenous technology in sanitation, health, hygiene, rural development are often mediated through, and are locked in, caste bound Hindu religion, community, culture, everyday practice. Which is further evident the role of technology in sulabh society is implicated in the stubbornness of casteism and traditions of exclusion. These underline the limitation of technology to overcome social biases. The premises of this kind of environmentalism not only attempt to absolved Dalits with in a dominant Hindu fold, but also naturalize the process through ecological determinant through ecological determinants".<sup>10</sup>

Moving on to important features that outlined the interface between caste and environmental politics in India, we can identify the following features: *exclusivist and particularistic Hindu Indianism; denial of enlighten modernity; considering religion, culture, caste, tradition, food, and language as organic and ecologically self-sustained; conservation of a composite system of humans, plants, animals, culture and religion specific to a particular nation or geographical region and the integrity of this particular ecosystem; defense of human and non-human world from foreign species and from the forces of globalization; renewal of caste traditions and cultural practices through the market; considering Dalits as naturally rooted in their village, tradition and homeland and as another piece of the natural system.*<sup>11</sup>

Ecological degradation in India has been perceived by many environmentalists as an outcome of imposition of colonial civilization of the west upon deeply rooted culture of India which is indigenous. Perceptions regarding ecology, in the past, are often read as severely balanced, harmonious, and self-sufficient and communities like women, forest dwellers, and peasants are the usual guardians of an ethic of conservation.<sup>12</sup> A green and a non-urban natural community is upheld by the opponents of globalization and laissez affaire economic reforms

as an emblematic of a national identity. While valorizing and romanticizing the tradition, these discourses do not realize its responsibility in making Dalits as untouchables.

### 2.1.1 Translation of caste loyalty into environmental politics

Let us have a brief look at how the caste system has been defended by the environmental discourses: firstly- as explained by Kailash Malhotra *"The caste system ... was actually based on an ancient concept of sustainable development which disciplined the society by partitioning the use of natural resources according to specific occupations (or castes); and "created" the right social milieu in which sustainable patterns of resource use were encouraged to "emerge".*<sup>13</sup> in another's opinions *'the Hindu caste system can be seen as a progenitor of the concept of sustainable development'*.<sup>14</sup>

Of late, defenders of liberal economy and Hindu right-wing ideologues have perceived caste as a 'driver of development', along with perceiving it as a 'social capital'.<sup>15</sup>

Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha who are renowned ecological historians of India also gave a functional justification of caste as they understood caste groups, in close complementarity and reciprocity and as enjoying customary and specialized occupational functioning while also developed the framework of resource use which significantly reduced competition among castes. For them, conservation of resources has been facilitated by local belief systems, social conventions, and Hindu gods.<sup>16</sup> in their opinion:

*"It is therefore appropriate to talk of the ecological niches of these various caste groups in terms of the habitats they occupy, the natural resources they utilize, and the relationship they bear to the other caste groups with whom they interact."*<sup>17</sup>

It is also observed that scholars narrate about the caste evolution defining it on the basis of an ecosystem, and calling Varna system as an 'essentially ecological in its logic', while also arguing that the varna evolution follows trophic lines and natural selection principles. Author attempted to establish an analogous relationship between trophic lines and the varna structures. The analogy goes like this: primary/autotrophic line (includes plants which convert solar energy into starch through photosynthesis) is analogous to Sudras who are considered as primary producers; similarly, the secondary or



heterotrophic line (includes the primary consumers) is compared with other three varnas that predate on autotrophs or Sudras; and lastly the third component of the trophic system (includes detritivores or decomposers) is equated with the Panchamas or the untouchables who performed the duties of cleaning waste disposed by the varnas from the higher echelon. Purnendu Kavoori, in his article, 'The Varna Trophic System: An Ecological Theory of Caste Formation', argues:

*“The maintenance of the varna structure is therefore the key element in the performance of dharma. Given the criticality of this concept to the Brahminic system, it is interesting that this equilibrium structure appears to be derived from ecological foundations. Foundations that are readily revealed if we look at the varna equations as a trophic system.”<sup>18</sup>*

Author further strengthen his arguments by explaining the process of evolution of the sections of population within the Panchamas and equates with the evolutionary development within the detritivore trophic system. The author provocatively tried to justify the untouchability basing it on ecological explanation. He talked of a natural law, antibiosis, which can be pronounced as survival and as competing strategy of certain section of species that secrete toxins in order to be aloof from others, while other species which cannot secrete those toxins cannot intermix with these detritivores. This comparison goes for the untouchables, as they are equated with toxic and made them unfit for the intermixture with other populations. Thus, Purnendu Kavoori states

*“It is deeply provocative but nonetheless logical to hold that the evolution of untouchability was in an ecological sense something of the masterstroke which enhanced the competitive advantage of those populations that adopted it (i.e., on whom discrimination was imposed). Thus, would have developed specialized population of decomposers, parasites, scavengers and so on. This in our view is the ecological rationale for the adaptive success of untouchability, the latent principle in the varna system.”<sup>19</sup>*

Along with justifying the caste system on the lines of a functional argument, eco-Brahminism offers some messy environmental argument, and explains the intertwining between caste culture and nature. Often in such arguments, we find how the natural world

determines the societal structure. Such arguments also believe that skill', 'knowledge', and 'culture' are decided less by evolution, history, societal institution, and personal efforts than by nature. With centuries of evolution of nature and its corresponding encounters with humans and others physical components of nature, the caste structure became more complex with multiple layers, and got stabilized in Indian social world. For instance, if some argued, that it is the natural resources with full potentials molded the ecosystem, life, and ways of living and working<sup>20</sup>, others like E.M.S Namboodiripad asserted in a reverse swing, that the interface between people and land gave rise to some castes gaining know-how, creativity, innovations, and rich culture and thus created high culture. As they say: "if these two arrangements (caste and the landlord system) had not existed, the Nambudiris would have been unable to engage in cultural activities and develop the science and literature and the Nairs could not have improved agricultural practices and develop their martial and physical prowess".<sup>21</sup>

Others like Ashok Dasgupta, in his article, 'Is Caste System a Kind of Indigenous Knowledge System?',<sup>22</sup> attempted to compare caste system to traditional or indigenous knowledge system. He understood caste system as service groups functioning on the lines of exchange patterns and surviving in terms of religious and cultural emblems. By providing an analysis of Gangetic Plains, the author tried to bring forth, the evolution of multiple divisions of labor in relation to multiple ecosystems. For him, caste were local communities long residing in the region and who knew about natural resources, nature friendly strategies to exploit those resources, and also knew how to organize society on the line of division of labor and ways to stabilize a particular nature- human relationship on the lines of religion and culture. Authors also find several castes within each division of labor as repositories of traditional knowledge system. For him, various castes have survived in the Gangetic Plains because of their utility and relevance, which gets manifested, according to the author through:

*"various types of public services, proper utilization of natural resources and environment management, conventional communication systems and transmission of messages, [informs us] how strong is the social structure and division of labor/social institutions, what is going on in peoples' minds, how to manage human resources, what would be the best politico-economic approach, outline of sustainable development, and so forth".<sup>23</sup>*

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### 2.1.2 Translation of Hindu ontology into ecological politics: unity of ‘social’ and ‘natural’ is upheld

Hindu religious texts have also been deployed by certain environmentalists to draw an ecological ethic or insides of environmental sustainability from those texts, which can be translated into useful rhetoric for the present day environmental politics. They do this with an aim to put forward Hindu religion based approach to vehemently tackle the environmental problems of India. They often quote Purushasukta hymns of Rig Veda to establish the origin of the social body (Brahmans from mouth, Kshetriya from the arms, Baisya from the thighs, and the Sudras from the feet) and cosmic body (gods, heavens, and the earth) from the sacrifice of Purusha, the sacred man, and also denotes the continuity between human and the cosmos, implying an advocacy of respect for the nature and its elements. Respecting such natural order is synonymous to an act of Dharma, which literary meant upholding the cosmos and which is also considered as best way of thinking and living to protect nature.

Scholars establish a Vedic approach to environment who see how Vedic religion a significant tradition provides practical teachings and conclusions for our survival on the earth. Ranchor Prime, suggests, that Vedic scriptures can solve the ecological crises of the present day industrialized world, as they advise for him, *‘that the knowledge of matter must be cultivated alongside the knowledge of the spirit, if it is to benefit humanity.’*<sup>24</sup>

L.M. Singhvi, in his environment and Vedic heritage makes an opening remark with a central idea in Vedic religion which is unity, in its varied forms. The doctrine of Vedic monotheism which is believed to resolve and reconcile diversities through its all enhancing philosophy:

*“The symbolism of Fire, Light and Dawn, in the same way as the symbolism of different gods of the Vedic pantheon including Surya, Savitri, Varuna, Mitra and many others, represents and reflects the larger cosmic truth of concordance between inner and outer space and a bridge between the spiritual and the ecological.”*<sup>25</sup>

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Reference from various sacred texts are also very often invoked, for agricultural and environmental wisdom, along with implicit caste assumptions like hierarchy, segregation, occupation, *etc.* for agricultural welfare and labor:

*“This fear of Dharma dynamics is exclusively helpful in constant supply of labor into traditional Indian agrarian rural structure through the caste system. Whereas Nishkarma Karma literally means work without any expectation: so, doing your duty in a proper way, but without any such expectation for the next life.”<sup>26</sup>*

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Similarly, it is also believed:

*“Certain caste service is highly appreciated especially that of the priests enjoying hegemony in rural set up. Only they can bring blessings of the nature by appeasing the Super Nature necessary for a good crop yield.”<sup>27</sup>*

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Efforts have also been put forth by the environmentalist for the renewal of traditional caste based occupation with a view of a new occupation of those to current needs and occasion. Condemning modern toilets, sanitation and sewage, is a part of such renewal as their concerned as western system inappropriate for India. They also suggest that human based disposal should be based on traditional mode of sanitation. In an ideal village, according to them, dry toilets, where water is removed and composted daily constitute eco-society. Thus, the teachers:

*“Traditional systems that have worked for thousands of years should not be interfered with—there's usually a good reason why they have worked so long. A further lesson is that the Western system of sanitation, developed in a part of the world where water is plentiful, is inappropriate for India, where water is scarce and so valuable that it is considered sacred.”<sup>28</sup>*

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Translating caste loyalty into environmental politics is one of the components of eco-Brahminism, where caste is rationalized and justified through nature,

allowing the dominant caste to validate the power and organize eco-movements through such a conception.

The other components of eco-Brahminism being the recovery of the tradition, the natural and the indigenous, where such recoveries are translated into ecological politics only to 'naturalize' Dalits within a home, community and nation. Some scholars have understood society as natural, community as given and nature as divine, intrinsic, and cosmic to establish an Indian approach to nature. Under this approach, the social and the natural are identical to each other at the collective level, in a unified ecosystem which must be kept intact through confirming to the loss of nature and while also maintaining diversity and unity in nature the social, according to this approach, does not merely include only people but also their practices, culture, tradition and nation. Therefore, environmental protection and protection of Indian culture, tradition and nation are synonymous to each other, and ecological crises are understood as Indian civilization crises and loss of our national, cultural, or ancient identity. As stated by Banwari, one of the prominent proponents of this approach:

*"We can see that our ancestors essentially followed natural principles. Whether they were developing the science of architecture, or founding villages, towns and cities, or developing farming, or weaving methods, or developing techniques for making steel, or developing Ayurveda, the science of medicine, or were formulating customs, rituals, and festivals, they never allowed themselves to be far removed from nature, or the laws of nature."<sup>29</sup>*

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Banwari also demonstrated that the destruction of our natural environment is linked to changes in our lifestyle, thinking, and tradition. He opines that our interaction with nature is becoming weak both at physical and mental level, and while also articulating that the knowledge of and impact of modern science, and industrial civilization, and our attitude to gain material success are the main culprits.

Another well-known environmentalist shows how the western style of technological modernization and social concepts like secularism have rapidly breaking the ecologically sensitive features of Hinduism as he believes that the concepts like secularism has brought about worst type of individualism and instead of seeing the people within the framework of a lifestyle which got developed over many years, the present day modern

world had rushed into a money economy, centered around greed but not on need people's enhancing prosperity and consumerism, reflected in their selfishness, individualism, money mindedness, and competitive nature, is equated with the crisis in Indian culture and tradition. Prominent environmental writer states:

*“The material culture has swallowed our civilization—it is totally devoid of an inner expression, spiritual progress and creative ability of humankind.... In fact, today we are flying in the air of Western luxurious life and its every particle is filled with our selfishness, individualism, lust for money and cut-throat competition.... First and foremost, here is the pollution of our mind and heart. Heart and mind are the Centre of our knowledge and action. When our heart is dirtied, it pollutes our actions, ideas and emotions. Human beings leave their humanness, they break their relationship with nature and environment, and the ideals of our society are shaken”.*<sup>30</sup>

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Another writer recommends that we begin a ‘cultural evaluation of our environment’ with which we can rejuvenate a healthy and balanced natural environment. For him culture resonates with pure and pristine values and attempted to show how piousness which originates from cultural environment is ingrained within our customs, ritual, social systems ethics, etc. it is also argued by some that the spirituality and faith are hallmarks of an environment. Therefore, one has to realize, it is said, the supreme without any desire and lust. Since, modern development, it is believed, is marked with provoking endless desire among humans, therefore, our attempts should focus on achieving the ‘eternal and the infinite in spirituality’, a basis of Indian tradition and civilization. Thus, within this logic, restorations of ‘Indian tradition, religion, and non-western culture’ go simultaneously with the perception that the threat to environment is ‘western, material, physical and commercial development’. An environmental activist and the writer Shubhu Patwa insists in his book:

*“The conquest on nature is a Western paradigm. In the Indian perspective, man is not the master, but the son of nature. Our relationship between man and nature can be called 'forest culture'.*

*'Forest culture' is our Indian culture. However, we are seriously at fault today in our understanding of nature*".<sup>31</sup>

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According to this approach, the message is, our minds are polluted by 'others and not by us, our environment is threatening by other' and their dirty influences and the main reason behind natural destruction is the destruction of our traditional values and culture.

### **2.1.3 Translation of Hindu ontology into environmental politics: unity of 'physical' and 'moral' is upheld**

Meera Nanda in her book 'Breaking the spell of other Dharma and other Essays' argues:

*"Hindu ontology does not separate matter or physical natures from the spirit of the moral realm, action in the moral realm are admitted as eliciting equal reactions in the physical realm. Thus, asserted 'karmic' crimes can bring about anything from birth as an untouchable, to natural disaster as earthquake, floods, drought, disease, etc. this peculiar nature of metaphysics which rationalizes injustices and misfortunes as a natural consequence of workings of loss of nature*".<sup>32</sup>

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Hindu metaphysics does not only distinguish between the social and the natural but also does not separate the material from the spirit. Such an approach is upheld by environmental and Hindu nationalist discourses not only their writing and speeches and but also in their concepts and languages which they used to express, societal relation and in defense environmental protection. They try to couple protection of environment with protecting the life in its 'natural order'. Thus, we can understand that this approach not only defines society in terms of language of nature but also 'justify the supposed naturalness of the social order'. Proponents of this approach suggests some principles of nature like recycling, symbiosis, antibiosis, and stability on which all human activities like agriculture, industries, and social organization, need to be based.

According to this approach the human and nature relationship must rely on the Sanathan Dharmik principles which have the potential to provide an ecological ethic guarantying the survival of the humanity. It is also believed that the inseparability of nature, culture

and life is based on the sustenance of the natural order in which nature is upheld as self-regulatory, requiring no human intervention. Thus, in this approach, when Hindu metaphysics does not separate the matter from the moral we can find, the following assumptions: society has to be described in the language of nature; all human actions have serious environmental consequences: humans are not masters of the nature rather they are to be viewed as within the nature subjected to same laws of nature.

This approach outlines its eco-enemy as ‘immigrants, migrants, minorities and Dalits’. It is believed that the major threat to ecology is multiculturalism and immigration. Hygiene as an ecological problem, at the level of society is believed to be hindered by impure, polluted, and dirty. Therefore, as a counter, a ‘new, assertive, and confident’ patriotism is advocated. Multicultural society is understood as an obstacle to the natural unity between Indians and their environs. Environmentalist put forth, hostile vocabulary in relation to migrants and immigrants. For example; they believed that the Western Ghats are being destroyed by the migrant’s seculars of Kerala to our Syrian Christians, and they are being aided in their efforts by Christian missionary:

*“The role of a Shimoga based missionary institution, called Shantiniketan, is said to be glaringly visible in the migration of people from Kerala and their encroaching [on] forest and vacant revenue lands”.<sup>33</sup>*

It is also believed that the above migrants which are in discussion are being helped by foreign countries like the U.S.A, with a motive to convert Hindus to Christians and therefore there is need to awaken:

*“The Awakening: The local people are slowly realizing the meaning and the dangers of this illegal encroachment and deforestation. They are preparing for a struggle against this threat. The Appiko (just like the Chipko) movement, Vriksha Samrakshishi Vedik (Save the Tree Forum), Parisara Samrakshana Vedike, Hindu Jagarana Vedic, etc., are some of the organizations spearheading this people's movement. They have already held meetings, processions and dharnas to bring pressure on the state government to bring a halt to this dangerous trend. They have also taken up some positive projects such as Triksha Raksha Andolan' by planting lakhs of saplings to reinforce our*



*vanishing forests. Educating the public is also a part of the movement*".<sup>34</sup>

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What is being outlined is also a declined of population of Hindus, as it is argued, that the community of Muslims reproduce at rates higher than Hindus. Therefore, scholars are identified this demographic catastrophe as a reason behind the distraction of nature and its resources;

*"The Muslim fundamentalists who raise a hue and cry for Muslim interests must answer why the community—an integral part of Hindusthan—fails to safeguard the national interest and depletes the nation's resources"*.<sup>35</sup>

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Similarly, lower castes (the 'impure' and the 'polluted') have also been perceived as eco-enemy. Umesh Rathore highlights the inherent link that exists between nature and Vedic Hindu Caste culture to show the 'best ideal and model for environment protection to be embodied in the following figures widow, Brahmin, and *brahmachari* (male celibate and chaste person).'

## Chapter III

### 3.1 Ecological history of Dalits

Environmentalism as perspective <sup>1</sup> has depicted a non-colossal collective identity of the vulnerable or poor in various environmental movements in the longitudinal north and south. Such movements have often excluded untouchables and Dalits and ignored their environmental losses and risks. For example; Dalit thinkers have criticized even the glaring environmental movements <sup>2</sup>, like ‘Narmada Bachao Andolan’ (NBA) and termed it as ‘Patidar Land Bachao Andolan’ (PLBA), as they have reflected only the concerns of land owners and have often glorified the cruel past and oppressive local institutions in rural areas. Alf Gunvald Nilsen<sup>3</sup> pointed out how NBA has occluded and wiped out issues of Dalits and caste domination in the anti-dam struggle. As Amita Baviskar says, for the movement to be successful, it “must convert fluid identities into primordial and unitary categories; tribes, women, or peasants; all must appear to be internally undifferentiated and uniformly opposed to the state<sup>4</sup>”. Therefore, one can identify a continued language of commonality and –uniformity that has captured the eco-scene in the contours of India’s environmental history. Thus, India’s glaring mainstream environmental history has kept aloof from those living on the margins of human existence, invoking a challenge to understand their meanings and implications of nature. As demonstrated in the first chapter, how ‘Eco-Brahminism’, as an essence of Indian mainstream environmental thought and practice, has excluded and inferiorized Dalits. But, in this chapter I interrogate, how Dalit meanings of environment have counter posed themselves to ideas and practices of such neo-Brahminism and to certain mainstreams of environmental thought. Taking Dalit environmental history, which Indian nature writing has often marginalized, this chapter attempts to see how Dalits think about nature; the way attitudes, beliefs, and values influence their interaction with nature especially in the form of myths, religion, and science.

Dalit thinkers and activists have immensely drawn our attention to civil rights however, their narrations and expressions on our relationship with nature has relatively been little explored. The interface between Dalits and nature has shifted spatially and temporally, and in socio-natural conditions. Dalits as a category, moreover, doesn’t mean a singular

identity, or a united homogeneous voice and practice, as they have had complex and creative narratives of nature. While trying to understand environment through Dalit lens, the present study neither claims that Dalits attitudes are better nor valorize their standpoint. Kancha Ilaiah<sup>5</sup> construes Dalit closeness to nature, to argue for their more cultural ecological vitality and creativity. In a post Hindu India, K. Ilaiah provides a romantic account of Dalits relationship with nature, invoking their original environmental, technological, scientific, and productive knowledge systems and claims their role and contribution in all spheres of life in the national progress, and unsurprisingly makes Dalits take pride in their caste consciousness at times. In the words of Mukul Sharma<sup>6</sup> “stretching the boundaries of environment history and capturing the Dalit encounters with nature should not be takes as an exercise in creating a ‘myth of the golden Dalit past’, where either as the ruler or the ruled they were living in perfect harmony with nature.”

Dalit ecological experiences have their own vibrancy and dynamism. On the one hand, Dalit experiences and narratives consistently underscore their everyday ecological burdens in a marked hierarchical order, while on the other, living with nature, they constantly negotiate with and challenge caste domination and simultaneously articulate their environmental imagination. The interaction between Dalits and nature is complex and conflict ridden, manifested through regular collaboration and conflict with caste dominated eco-space, as well as in their creation of an autonomous space.

Dalits have usually articulated their relationship with ecology under the terrain of social as opposed to explicitly environmental. For example, Chamars of North India flagged the Nara-Maveshi Movement in mid 1950s to set polluting caste based occupations; they had concerns of labor, livelihood, animal, and environment.<sup>7</sup>

The emergence of land issues in the 1960s and 1970s was aimed at revisiting its origin, access, distribution, conservation, continuity, and memory. Such sensibility and knowledge has been evident historically in anti-caste thinking and activism. One of the key principles of Ambedkar, Phule and Periyar was how to deal with village, land, agriculture, water, and forest.

Putting light on strings of Dalits by connecting the pearls with Dalits environment and their relationship is an approach to explore Dalit environmental history. Dalits are being largely invisible on one hand and they have been mostly seen as cheerleaders of

development and modernity, detached from environmental discourses on the other. Of late, Dalit scholars like Bama have termed Dalits as rooted in the soil<sup>8</sup> underlining Dalits as a community with the socio-contextual and organic connection with nature and natural resources. Dalit and environment organizations, in the recent past, have tried to investigate if there is any imposition of hierarchies of caste in the event of climate change—induced disasters.<sup>9</sup> Climate change and its adaptation, and mitigation strategies are rich with suggestions from prevalent discourses regarding the Issues of inclusion and exclusion of Dalits, from the perspective of disaster risk reduction. On the same lines, efforts have been made to express Dalit concerns in forestry<sup>10</sup> by invoking changes in existing forest policies and practices, including joint and community forest management. The growing Dalit assertiveness is also believed to be significantly altering both community solidarity and the nature of ownership of natural resources. For instance, South Indian Dalits, who were categorically prohibited entrance to the sacred groves, are gaining access to them while also laying claims to land and other resources there. Eliza Kent, in her well-researched study on sacred groves in Tamil Nadu, concludes: “Such development may also lead to democratization of access to the groves, making them available to groups long excluded or marginalized from worship in them”.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Dalit Mukti Morcha of Chattisgarh organized national convention on Caste Discrimination and Dalit Rights over Natural Resources<sup>12</sup> in September 2011. Another research underpinned that the caste question was inadequately considered in the making of ‘Forest Right Act’ (FRA).

The consecution between untouchability, atrocities, and assertion of forest rights opened a new area of legally challenging injustices felt by Dalits in forest areas. The nature and functioning of environmentalism, feminism, and secularism has been questioned by the famous Bhopal Document,<sup>13</sup> while also putting forth a Dalit agenda. It unhesitatingly described them as elitist in nature, as they prefer to take shelter in other movements while failing to join struggles of the out-castes/lower castes. Another research stresses that how Dalit historiographies have not paid much attention to Dalit histories and politics which have had strong environmental facets. Therefore, this research suggested that instead of looking for conventional environmentalism in typical environmental movements, we should focus more on Dalit political and

social traditions to locate their strands of environmentalism. For instance, this research shows how “Phule's considerable emphasis on agriculture productivity, bunds, water, and other natural resource—related issues drew inspiration from nineteenth-century concerns about oppressive economic structures and simultaneous efforts to build a movement of *Shudratishudras* to change the rural landscape. Numerous land struggles by landless, agricultural laborer's in different parts of the country remained an important part of struggles against colonialization, subjugation, and appropriation of natural resources. Ambedkar's *Mahad* struggle was aimed at freeing water and 'reclaiming the tank.’”<sup>14</sup> K.B. Saxena, brings forth a Dalit take on natural resources, and at times, their conflicts with environmental concerns by carrying out a comprehensive report<sup>15</sup> by the National Human Rights Commission on 'Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes Policy and Performance'. Many organized violent incidents against Dalits are related to land, water, forest, and sanitation issues. An exploitative village and caste system often attacks the Dalit labors and crushes the fruits of their labor. There are many obstacles to freedom of bonded laborers. Distribution of economic assets and natural resources in rural India is starkly unequal. There are multiple cases where Forest Rights Act has curtailed Dalit rights in the forests, and the Forest Department is sometimes the perpetrator of violence. Thus, environmental equality and justice are the touch-stones of Dalit environmental wisdom.

Significant studies around Dalits covered a range of subjects like Dalit histories, anti-caste intellectuals, untouchability, humiliation, human rights, dignity, reservation, gender, food, land, water and occupation, but no work has brought these issues together to explore the interface between Dalits and environmentalism. Dalit perspective on labor, natural resources, village communities, food, animals, vegetarianism and development have not integrated into environmental studies and politics. This may be because, either these issues have not been couched in an explicitly environmental language by Dalits or more importantly, certain mainstream environmental frameworks implicitly endorsed dominant Brahmanical understandings of natural belonging and unnatural pollution in which Dalits are either invisible, or 'naturalized', or present as victims to be uplifted through kind liberty, however, by adopting a Dalit lens, a different environmental understanding, encompassing ambiguities and complexities of caste, can be reached.

While providing examples from ancient to present day India and creating a mosaic of Dalit environmentalism(s). This chapter simultaneously tried to find ideological continuities and fractures between earlier Dalit traditions, their contemporary visions and present day Indian environmentalism.

The present chapter is divided into three sections, the first section deals how Dalits have pursued environmentalism long before the birth of formal modern environmental movements. The second section examines some examples of Dalit folklore and oral traditions in three regions of India to unveil their relationship with natural world. Transmitted by words of mouth, these cover prose and verse narratives, poems and songs, myths, dramas, and rituals. The third section deals with Dalit perspectives on gods, food, and animals, which bring forth new dimensions of Dalit environmentalism. Contemporary Dalit intellectuals and activists have played a pioneering role in collecting, uncovering, and producing such traditions, which were otherwise lost to us.

### **3.1.1 Dalit Environmentalism Preceding Modern Formal Environmental Movements and its origin**

K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu draws our attention to many Dalit poems, memoirs, and essays, which provide us with rich textures of Dalit connections to land, agriculture, water, and forest, documentations and compilations of Dalit writings and thought, in south Indian languages, particularly from the 1990s. For instance, Tamil Dalit writer, Imayam, in *Manbaaram*—a collection of stories, which literally mean 'the burden of the soil', refers to the labor involved, the sticky heaviness of the soil after the rain, and the emotional tension of farming. Dalit creativity and agency have not extinguished by caste domination and exploitation; indeed, these have provided specific meanings to Dalits labor and its daily interactions with natural resources. Satyanarayana and Tharu while introducing Imayam's work they found an intimate knowledge of small farmer about land and its tending, an attachment that comes from having worked the soil. They explain that in this village story, if there is an adversary, it is the untimely rain, not the upper-caste landlord. This small farmer informed them that the landowner and laborer relate on a level field.<sup>16</sup>

Kancha Ilaiah, in his pioneering work, *why I am not a Hindu* draws our attention to Dalit Bahujan meanings of nature and their eco-experiences in caste-ridden society. According to him, "Dalit Bahujan, with an intimate every day connection to the nature,

are constructors of the science of leather technology, builders of scientific use of manure, and innovators of tools of production, which not only improve our production but also keep our environment green and clean. The Shudra constructs knowledge of production, and brings innovation to agrarian and artisan technology. Moreover, the *chandala* makes villages, towns, and nation pollution free, and builds a culture that keeps the living environment clean.”<sup>17</sup>

Ilaiah explores a Dalit Bahujan theory of knowledge which is a result of their everyday interaction with nature. He also argues that this interface with nature is carried out either through a careful correlation of *svabhava* (nature in the sense of character or disposition) of nature with the *svabhava* of the human body, or through *viruddha pariseelana* (examination of contradictions) of two different *svabhavas*, which are then intermixed to undergo a *parinama* (transformation) or *marpu* (something to define or full width) to become something *kotha* (new).

Mukul Sharma articulates, that “while there is a certain romanticization of the Dalit-Bahujan perspective in Ilaiah’s narrative, it is distinctly different from the idealization of Dalits by eco-casteists and neo-Hindus. Ilaiah explicitly links Dalit ecological understandings with their physical labor, instruments, and objects of labor and work experience, which are based on caste exploitation, while neo-Hindus believe that nature has naturally and intrinsically connected Dalit to labor.”<sup>18</sup>

Some historical works have underlined Dalit agricultural techniques, where Landless cultivators and sharecroppers have used their backbreaking labor, hands, and arms as their most important tools to change the course of farming practices. They have practiced innovative agricultural and conservation methods, in spite of prevalent casteism. K.T. Rammohan, in his narration of 'tales of rice' focused on the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1940s in the Kuttanad region of Kerala to show how Kuttanad rice fields were created by reclaiming, enclosing, and draining the backwater, which was vast and deep and had strong wind and sea like tides and carried out the cultivation below sea level using different kinds of servile laborer, the landless, and the tenants, a majority of whom were Dalits from the Pulaya caste. K. T. Rammohan describes Pulayas work as path breaking and emphasizes that despite Pulayas evolved the fundamental principles of the technology and reclamation: “all available scholarly accounts of Kuttanad accord the credit for

reclamation to 'enterprising farmers' of Nayar and Syrian Christian communities disregarding the pioneering role of Pulayas."<sup>19</sup>

Komal Kothari, a pioneer in studying Indian folklore, particularly of Rajasthan, shows how musical and performance traditions (puppetry, Teratali, folk songs, and stories) of the low castes were ingrained in land, water, agriculture, irrigation, and livestock. Folklore of Dalits is filled with tales of their relationship with the environment, along with their ecological interactions with dominant castes, while attempting to divest the authority and sanctity built around dominant gods and castes, in the process they construct ecological mystiques. Through oral genealogists they narrate their past to reaffirm their present. For instance, Kothari noticed around 500 people listening to the genealogical records of two Mukhbancha Bhats, who were reciting a story of the origins of the Raut community with intricate rhythm patterns beaten on a drum, while passing through the Pipalia village near Chhoti Sadari in Mewar. The story concerned a man "named Punia, before whose time apparently no agriculture was practiced. Punia decided to learn it on his own and, for the first time, sowed some *makka* (maize), which grew well. At harvest time, suddenly, the Sun (Surya) and the Moon (Chandra) arrived and asked Punia as to how he could have grown the crops without their grace. Punia quickly responded that it was because of the help of gods—rays of sun giving light and the cool of moon allowing crops to sleep—that he had a successful crop. The gods promptly asked for their share, and Punia asked them to take whatever they wanted from the standing crop. The Sun and the Moon, having no knowledge of the actual nature of the plant, decided to collect its top part of beautiful flowery tendrils, and left the stem, where the maize actually grew. Punia was thus left with a rich harvest. Next year, Punia decided to plant jawar (sorghum). This time, the Sun and the Moon decided to demand the lower part, going by their previous years' experience, to which Punia again promptly agreed. This time too, Punia got his entire crop because jawar grows on top and the gods got nothing but straw. After narrating the story, one of the Mukhbancha Bhats asked the people: You've all heard the story, what do you think about it? Can you identify the Sun and the Moon?' And four to five hundred people shouted almost in unison: '*Chandravanshi, Suryavanshi*'. Kothari concludes by pointing out that these are the names of the feudal lords from the Rajput community."<sup>20</sup> Thus what is underlined in the above narrative, is that the ecological world of Dalits is not just about practices of labor but also about the distribution of labor value.



Dalit laborer's have a traditional cultural practice of *dhuri* (axis), where they plead with nature not to be harsh, and be kind enough to give rain so that the farmers can reap good crops, in the cotton-growing Warrar region of Maharashtra.<sup>21</sup>

*Chamars* of north India as cultivators and agricultural laborers performed several ceremonies based on the fertility of soil and covering ploughing, sowing, and reaping. Ramnarayan S. Rawat, states, how they had an elaborate way of beginning *kharif* and *rabi* seasons by marking their fields five times in different places with their plough, in his comprehensive study of *Chamars* in colonial Uttar Pradesh, and how different sets of ceremonies were specific to each crop:

*“For instance, In the case of wheat, at the start of the sowing season handful of grains were placed in small earthen pots and buried under the soil, a handful was thrown across the field in the direction of the Ganges, and five handfuls were buried in different parts of the field. The completion of sowing was followed by a fire sacrifice to honor the plow. It was also believed that the owner of the field must not be hungry at the time of sowing”.*<sup>22</sup>

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Mithila paintings depict daily experiences with nature of Dalits by the Dalit artists. Initial *godana* (tattoo) paintings of *Dusadh* women were mainly composed of flowers, fields, animals, and figures. The 'Tree of Life' and images of *surya* (sun) also figured prominently. For example, a painting by Sarwan Kumar Paswan and his mother Urmila Devi of the *Dusadh* caste reverberates with nature:

*“On an emerald green background, and only in black ink, in the godana (tattoo) style, it shows on the left the daily life of women: shown carrying water and straw, cooking, rocking an infant, and caring for animals. On the right we see forest animals. Beneath these scenes is a pond full of fish, including some in traps. And providing shelter above all these images is a massive 'Tree of Life' filled with birds.”*<sup>23</sup>

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These examples viewed from the perspective of agriculture, land, labor, and caste show us how Dalits have practiced environmentalism long before the birth of a formal modern environmental movement. The Dalit encounters with environment are often mediated

through caste. By weaving land, agriculture, and soil with caste discrimination, we can find stories of horror and heroism and attachment and ambivalence, which underline different modes of environmentalism. The following subsection, drawing from three different instances of Dalit environmental expressions, through literature and folklore, and dotted in different regions of India, which reveal the thoughts of agricultural laborer's, farmers, and villagers on what nature means to people for whom access to resources had been distorted historically.

### 3.1.2 Dalit Folk and Oral Traditions

C.J. Kuttappan has meticulously collected folklore of Dalits and tribals in the central Kerala region. This region with Pallakad, Thrissur, and Ernakulam- has the highest concentration of Dalits and tribal in the state and a good percentage of their population is confined to agriculture and allied activities. Amidst economic changes in the region, Dalit dependency on natural resources is visible everywhere and their livelihood depends on their labor. Dalit labor reverberates with songs on respecting and preserving nature, the importance of rotation of crops, and invocations of animals, crops, plants, and rivers. There are songs on coconut trees, toddy, knives, and ploughing; hymns about goddesses and sacred groves; and recurring themes of sun, earth, and water. Simultaneously, the songs express injustices of life and Dalit dreams. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu mention that these songs indicate, that in addition to working the land and being repertoires of agricultural knowledge and local history, Dalits also possessed hands on scientific and managerial knowledge of the soil, its cultivation, agricultural calendar, weather conditions and so on.<sup>24</sup>

Kuttappan's collection contains the following songs:<sup>25</sup>

“No beginning was there, nor end  
Then, in that long gone time  
Neither was there darkness, nor light/consciousness/knowledge Then, in that long gone time  
There were no numbers and no letter  
Then, in that long gone time  
Nor was there water, nor light  
Then, in that long gone time The Southern wind blew  
And it blew in a naughty manner  
The Northern wind blew  
And it blew in a lazy way

The Eastern wind blew  
 And blew in a straightforward manner  
 The Western wind blew  
 A red/fiery wind it was  
 The four winds, along with the God of wind  
 Blew round and round and round  
 Like an umbrella, and the Earth  
 Without being known, came into being.”

“Seeking oldness and earthiness  
 My uncles are also searching for wealth  
 The earth has mothered me -  
 And the earth departs from me  
 And the seekers of wealth for me  
 Are my uncles who sought  
 Directions must be ascertained, country must prosper  
 God in the form of five elements must prosper Earth must prosper  
 Space must prosper Troubles must cease Life must prosper  
 Earth and wealth sought and built by my forefathers Rising in the east and setting in the west  
 Come within earshot and dwell with us  
 O! my fathers and forefathers.”

“What is this Contamination of yours, my lord? If you are pricked, blood is what comes out  
 If we are pricked, blood comes out too  
 Then why my lord  
 Do you create such a row?  
 What color is this Contamination, black or white? How long or big is this Contamination, o Brahmin?  
 While you smear sandal on yourself in your palace  
 we get smeared by mud and dirt in our fields  
 Whets you have your royal. feast in your palace  
 We eat our humble gruel in our fields  
 Water is pushed in the backward direction when you row Water is pushed in the backward direction  
 when we row too.  
 Then what is this Contamination of yours, my lord? Then what is this Contamination of yours?  
 Better move aside, move aside, yore!  
 Just move aside, move aside, you.”  
 Flourish, flourish, flourish, flourish  
 Land must flourish, world must flourish

Thatched roofing flourish, threshold flourish  
 Just like the prime of sweet sixteen,  
 Thatched roofing flourish  
 When thirty-three trees were planted  
 Only three fruit yielding trees blossomed  
 Flowers of that tree are in my head  
 Turn away, turn away, Pulayan, make way Thickets thither and thorns hither.  
 How any I to head the way?  
 I have children in my arms  
 And a toddy picher on my head  
 How am I to board the board the boat thriller?  
 Unless it come hither.  
 Didn't you break the coconut we gave?  
 Didn't you see the kernel and the contents?  
 When you are poked, it is the same blood  
 When we are poked, it is the same blood  
 Then why speak of the caste superiority?  
 Why talk of caste and untouchability?

In the first song Kuttapan shows how Dalit cosmology has unique rumbling on nature that does not infuse the material landscape with any particular religious discourse. And in the second poem Kuttapan shows how earth has carried life, people, forefathers, things, wealth, prosperity, hope and future and remained a contemporary liberator. In the third poem there is strange mix of nature, caste, untouchability and work. The ecological experience of Dalits presents themselves through their everyday work. Dalit agricultural laborer give vivid and detail description of effect of caste and untouchability on human relationships with land. At the same time through the fourth poem Kuttapan shows how Dalit ecological expression sometimes carried multiple layers- laboring and liberating. Caste oppression did not negate possibility of creative possibilities.

Such expressions have many resonances with environment. Kuttapan's cultural historical recordings of Dalit songs underline how untouchables coped with forced labor, agricultural toil, cruelty, and casteists underpinnings ingrained in their dealings with nature, which were projected as natural and everlasting. In the absence of social national belongings, these songs also expressed an ecological belonging to earth, natural resources, and non-human elements. There was no single, uniform Dalit perspective on

nature. Rather, Dalit folklore highlights plurality of voices, varied arguments, and different regional contexts and social locations, which are linked to different genres and modes thinking about nature. A point of convergence can perhaps be found in Dalits' search for belonging in the natural world. Here, there is a questioning of caste in conjunction with the fruitfulness, and vulnerability, of nature.

Mukul Sharma brings out Basudev Sunani's prominent work,<sup>26</sup> 'Dalit Sankrutira Itihas' (cultural history of Dalits), which was published in 2009 to show how Sunani draws the line between various dots, encapsulating them to form a vibrant picture-Dalit sense of reciprocity and celebration of nature, their joys and everyday life with plant and planets, Dalit spirituality, and pragmatic- practical ecological needs.

He belongs to western Odisha where Dalit culture still has a visible presence, quite different from the coastal region where it has been largely erased by dominant high caste culture, quite different from the coastal region where it has been largely erased by dominant high-caste culture.

Based on his long-drawn research on Birtiaa, Parghanian, and Ghogia castes of Bolangir, Charier, and Nuapada regions, Basudev asserts that the cultural histories of Dalits in Odisha reveal deep and complex relationships with nature and natural resources. Here, earth is a great sacred place, where divine blessings of the Great Spirit and Great Ancestors can be sensed and touched. Crops, fruits, vegetables, and leaves are viewed as beautiful, having an intimate bond with humans and nature. There is a sense of wonder and joy around nature, a feeling of pleasure in the diversity and creativity of life around land, water, forest, and agriculture, which is expressed through regular celebrations and festivals. Music, *murri baza* (music without horn), *singh baza* (music along with horn) and *dhap baza* (music from a circular instrument covered with calfskin and played through a small piece of thick wooden stick), and musical instruments, *nishan*, *mahuri*, *dhol*, *tasha* and *gholghola* are part of such celebrations.

Dalit narratives here reveal: earth is where the souls of forefathers live; the earth is alive and powerful and must be treated with respect and care. In every Dalit house, at an earthy sacred place, lives Duma, their forefather, who is worshiped. Duma was believed to be an ordinary human being in the past who discovered all the eatables and the secrets of nature for the benefit of common people. Dalits express their devotion to the older generation, represented by Duma, for such discoveries. The ancient duma, worshiped in the name of Devi or Devata, is thus offered their first eatables. Basudev also mentions

that Dalit cultural manifestations here are an anti-thesis of Aryan culture. In the later, the departed soul goes heaven, where in the former, the departed again comes back to the pidar (sacred place inside the house where the soul of the forefather are worshiped), and are worshiped by the same family member. Unlike a temple, no priest is needed for Duma Devi or Devata.

Celebrating and worshipping nature is central to Dalit rituals and festivals. Changing seasons, closely associated with land, agriculture, and crops, are occasions for celebrations and critical to Dalit life in western Odisha, states Vasudev. Ordinary mundane activities of agriculture and related labor become part of a reciprocal arrangement between nature and human beings. Nuakahi (celebrating eating of new crops), Dasahara, Pithodi (celebrating husking of rice), Karam nsani (worshipping a branch of the Hadan tree or goddess Karam Sani), Asaridiena (worshipping agriculture), Daal Khai (young girls worshipping goddess Dal Khai for their brothers, and for protection of environment), Pushpuni (festival of Pousha), and Fagun Puni (festival of Chaitra)—all are anchored in nature relationship, production, and protection. Reciprocity and offerings are vital, which are not so much religious as acknowledgements of great gifts of nature. These varied examples underline that Dalits in western Odisha are imbued with a deep knowledge of environment and celebrate its diversity as a part of their everyday life.

Another relatively unknown Gujarati Dalit writer Dr. Dalpatbhai Shrimali brings out story of the Mayavel in his book 'Harijan Saint' and folklore. He also documented many Dalit folklores and stories on different aspects of life. Mayavel is a story of the *narmedh* (human sacrifice) of *maya* for water and for his community, *Oad*, a lowly caste traditional associated with tilling, digging, and carrying earth to construction sites of the ruler. The framework of the story goes like this, "Siddhraj Jaisinh was considered the most prominent king of Gujarat, who ascended the throne of Patan in 1096 and conquered Saurashtra, Kutch, and Malwa. His rule has been regarded as glorious golden era for Patan and for the region in dominant narrative. However, his rule was very ruthless and cruel towards Dalits. Jaisinh decided to construct and renovate Sahastraling Lake in Patan as it was thirsty, dry region, relying on the hard labor of *Oads* and their knowledge of water and earth. The king got attracted towards Jasma, a beautiful woman laborer, and tried unsuccessfully to force himself upon her. In revenge he killed her husband. In pain Jasma killed herself and cursed the king that Sahastraling Lake would always be waterless. The story moves on to the brahmins advising the king that human sacrifice of a complete man, baring the thirty-two qualities specified in Hindu Sashttras, would enable

the water to flow in the lake. The search for such a man culminates with identification of maya, an Oad. The story ends with maya sacrificing his life in the middle of the dry lake. His sacrifice, however, is not only to get water in the lake, but also to restore some dignity and rights to his persecuted community.”<sup>27</sup>

In this story Jasma becomes a source of cognitive memory and provides an explanation of societal phenomena- women and labor, labor and nature and caste, water, and atrocity. The evolution of this story reached to different stages with the evolution of Dalit eco-narratives, revealing how Dalits are extinguished in their social ecology, displaying their ability to develop distinct affinities with nature and its resources. The Dalit here is not only oppressed and acts as a critique of upper caste injustice, but also gains recognition from the upper caste in his capacity as a general savior.

We get varied examples of Dalit environmentalism in diverse symbols. Relying largely on secondary sources, this section of the chapter focuses on some of these arenas. By taking fragmentary examples of gods and goddesses, animals, and food, it shows how new ecological meanings are imparted to them through Dalit interactions and discourses. Examining these subjects through a Dalit lens expands our definitions of environment.

### **3.1.3 New Dimensions of Dalit Environmentalism through Eco-Symbols Like Gods, Food, and Animals**

There is a detailed account of many Dalit Bahujan gods and goddesses in south India given by Kancha Ilaiah which are expressions of Dalit-Bahujan productive cultures and which are associated with natural resources and environment, basically depicting such images in human existence and in relations between productive forces and nature:

*“A Kattamaisamma is a discoverer of a tank system, a Pochamma is the discoverer of herbal medicine for all diseases, a Beerappa is the earliest sheep breeder, a Potaraju the protector of the fields, a Yanadi a steel technologist”.*<sup>28</sup>

People epitomize different ecological apparatus as their gods and goddesses, for example Dalit gods and goddesses like Gonthemma, Maramma, Nancharamma, and Ankallamma are associated with agriculture, land, and water in Andhra Pradesh<sup>29</sup>. In Tamil Nadu, non-Brahmin castes have exclusive deities to worship sacred groves.

Likewise, in other parts of south India, Dalits have erected their own statues of gods and goddesses in and outside of sacred groves. Several such examples are found in Eliza Kent's study on sacred groves. People from different echelons erected their faith differently from different natural resources like to the south of Pondicherry, "a 1.5-hectare sacred grove is outside the village Kuzhandaikkuppam in Cuddalore district, where Dalits have their own Kadavadi Veeran, protector of forests. This Kadavadi Veeran is distinguished from the main one where Dalits are not allowed to enter. In other villages, Brahmans and Dalits interpret the deities of sacred groves differently. Kent gives an example of the Sri Seliyamman temple, in the Urani scared groves, in Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu. As the guardian of the village and the forest, Seliyamman's role is to repel threatening outsiders, whether ghosts, disease, famine, or thieves".<sup>30</sup>

Forests are also marked by Dalit deities; besides sacred groves and they have their own unique way of narration and interpretation around them. Siddalingaiah, A famous Kannada Dalit poet, who is also the founder of the Dalit Sangharsh samiti, and author of Gramadevathegalu,<sup>31</sup> in his study of village deities in Karnataka, describes a deity called Bisilamma, who is supposed to be worshipped in and around Bengaluru, and 'wants to be burnt under the sun, shiver the cold and get drenched in the rain'. She might want to be part of nature or to face hardships. Braving nature goes against the history of civilization itself, which has tried to conquer and overcome nature's hardships. In a different region of the state, Bakala, a Madiga sage was discovered by Dalit writers in a different part of the state, who, it is believed, land created from the waters bodies, sacrificing his two sons in the process. More instances have construed that "Dalits in Karnataka also turned towards older traditions, such as Manteswami, Malemadeshwara, and Junjappa, and searched out the deity Dharege Doddavru (Elder of the Earth), who bestowed land upon the landless."<sup>32</sup>

Likewise, in southern Bihar, Dalit agricultural laborer's natural world is inhabited by their own gods and goddesses. Such as in Gaya district the Bhuinyas have their divine figures such as birs (braves) who are evoked for agriculture, irrigation, forest, labor, and production. The story of Rikhminia (also known as Rikhmun and Rikhiasan), which is identified with Tulsi Bir, was widely narrated in the past and still is in the present.<sup>33</sup>



Dalits have been living alongside animals and rely as well as depend on them for food, fiber, labor, livelihood, and companionship. Similarly, Dalit writings have references to experiences with animals for various purposes like agriculture, wildlife, pets, and other domesticated species. Dalit lives are also compared with animals often in an abhorrent or disrespect way in a different context, as they are said to be treated like animals rather than humans. In some prominent Hindu religious texts Dalits were being called ‘dog’ and ‘dog-cookers’.<sup>34</sup>

It is stated in some texts that “It is Dalit and shudra boys who take animals for grazing and protect them all through the day ... seen people in slums cohabiting with street dogs and cats in their homes.”<sup>35</sup> Dalits are peacefully coexisting with animals in their natural and social environment. For example, Dalit artists, mainly *Chamars* and *Dusadhs*, asserted themselves in the world-famous Mithila/Madhubani paintings of Bihar, their distinctive forms of Gobar and Godana paintings had significant images of wild and domesticated animals, deriving inspiration from scenes and events in their everyday lives, namely, Chamars disposing a dead cow, a snake moving speedily through the paddy fields, an elephant crushing people, and others. In north Bihar, the Chamars were by occupation makers of footwear, cultivators, and laborer’s. Their traditional occupation included the disposal of dead animals and the preparation of different objects out of the skin of dead animals. Dusadhs, agricultural laborers were one of the useful castes in the area. They were being supported themselves mostly through agriculture and cultivation but they reared cattle and pigs<sup>36</sup>. Dalits have their own sort of perception, preferences and reasoning regarding animals and their environmental milieu. Different ways of considering animals within a hierarchical order is different. For example: Mushahars in the Gangetic plains of Bihar showed how school children of a tola (a small village) called Salempur (Bahora Bigaha) in Gaya had different views about animals. In higher echelon or Children of Brahmins and forward castes had a different preference comparing to the Dalit section of the society where cows were worshiped and considered the pig dirty and non-profitable. It must be noted here that the Musahar/Bhuinya children had a preference for pigs since they had no house of their own to reside in and no piece of land at their disposal to pursue agricultural activities, no separate cowshed for keeping cows and no other way out to manage husk and other feed for the animals. Cow rearing for them was more expensive to deal with as compare to

rearing pig. Besides this they did not find pig and pig rearing a dirty and polluting exercise. Amongst Musahars pigs were considered as their natural social and economic companion<sup>37</sup>.

Considering 'buffalo' a valuable commodity, particularly for Dalits since buffaloes are widely domesticated due to resource availability in the form of milk and meat. In a larger context buffalo has been a rich source of Dalit discourse on nature, nationalism, environmentalism, Hindu religion, and culture. Dalits are being identified more with buffaloes than cows. According to Dalit writers, Hindu nationalist politics used the cow to retain their Brahmanical tradition and domination by characterizing cow an animal with white race. And in this process buffalo, the indigenous black animal was marginalized.<sup>38</sup>

Animals were always being used to describe a particular Caste and religion and also to describe the origin and location, and colour and complexion of animals. A prominent Dalit poet named Aravinda Malagatti, in his modern Kannada classic *Government Brahmana* asked, "if it was not said that the crow, owl, dog, ass, sheep, and buffalo were sage Vishwamitra's creations, while pigeon, horse, and cow were sage Vasishta's creations?"<sup>39</sup>

The focus on animal welfare and environmentalism is consistently critiqued by the Dalits for being closely tied to Brahmanical Hindutva and the politics of exclusion. The issue of animal protection has particularly become a point of contest and confrontation in the recent past between Dalit politics, the State, and Hindutva forces. For example, ban on animal sacrifice in the temples of Tamil Nadu in early 2000 had upset and disregarded the Dalit sentiments, as during the Kodai festivals and folk-deity temple worship Dalits practiced animal sacrifice which is their age-old tradition. Due to which a colossal mass of Dalits opposed it vehemently throughout the state.<sup>40</sup>

Interrelationship between Dalits, food, and the environment has multiple facets and Dalits have their own way of narrating earth, food, and their environment. Dalits bring to our attention the multiple linkages and interconnections between what Dalits eat and how this matters for earth's resources. They also provide a different meaning to the consequences of our food choices and habit, due to which different practices of production and consumption is assessed in our society. Having an eye on Dalit's plate what they consume

and how they see it can provide us distinct insights about our food and environment structure.

Food for Dalits has never been a given thing in such a hostile or malevolent natural and social environment. But the real thing for them is uncertainty regarding availability, accessibility, and affordability of food at the same time hunger, deprivation, and struggle for getting food that they face every day besides the prevalent natural resources. Dalit accounts of their food and environment have two dominant themes: first, a dire need and desire to mitigate their hunger with whatever available and given through village, forest, land, or river; second, a rousing and loving celebration of food and environment, to overcome their deprivation. *Musahars*, for example, became known as 'rat catchers' or 'rat killers' (*muss* meaning 'rat' and *har* meaning 'catcher' or 'killer'). According to Kumar Suresh Singh, the famous anthropologist and author of the People of Indici project, *Musahars* were living in areas of vast forest coverage with a variety of flora and fauna, and had to kill rats, birds, and animals to manage their food. *Musahars* picked up grains from harvested fields as well as out of rat holes. The natural environment made their role as rat eaters or food gatherers important in the past.<sup>41</sup>

In the villages of Rajasthan, myths, songs, and stories surrounding grain narrate the unequal access to food and socio-economic hierarchies. Ann Gold, in her landmark research on Rajasthan tales, found that Dalit metaphors and stories around grain evoke Anna Dev (the Grain God), solar and lunar eclipses, moon and sun, dirt and flies, and several such images.<sup>42</sup>

In Uttar Pradesh, Dalits had bitter historical memories of how they were killed for the 'crime' of preparing and giving 'polluted' food to a high-caste person. A Jatav from Agra, Karan Singh, was killed in the 1920s because of this crime and after a bitter protest and defiance organized by Dalits, became a martyr in Jatav social memory.<sup>43</sup>

Unlike Hindu Brahmins and upper castes, Dalits have widely articulated their food habits based on their economy, society, health, nutritional needs, and environment. They have bitterly questioned attempts at homogenization of food habits and sensibilities on the basis of caste. Since food and eating habits and distinctions between pure/ polluted, cooked/uncooked, vegetarian/non-vegetarian have been central to practices of untouchability, Dalits have time and again broken such divisions and hierarchies, even on environmental grounds. The Dalit Students' Union, in the context of the meat-eating controversy at Hyderabad Central University in 2002,<sup>44</sup> argued:

“The concept of Indian food sentiments' under the name of secular and pan Indian tradition was being hegemonized as one of vegetarianism. The implication was that rich upper-castes could survive on such diet needed for proper nutrition but the lower-castes would have to survive on just cereals, thus denied the meat that could have been a source of nutrition for them”<sup>45</sup>.

Eminent intellectual Gopal Guru gives an example of a folk song sung mostly by Dalit women in Maharashtra to explain the sharp divide between two contesting notions of food. Dalit women assert the superiority of non-vegetarian food (beef) over vegetarian food (sweet laddoos) by singing how a basket full of laddoos cannot be a substitute for even a quarter plate of beef *pati bhar laddu kai kamache, wati bhar pahije matan, ani wati bhar matana sathi zurate man na ho; bajar chya divashi matan nasel tar kasa divas legato bhanbhan, an wati bhar matana sathi zurate man na ho.*<sup>46</sup>

Choices of having food and recipes to make such food had been documented by late Sharmila Rege by working and practicing with Dalit men and women in few district of Maharashtra (for example; Pinjari castes of Pune)<sup>47</sup>

Palatable food always been worked as a relishing agent in lives irrespective of class, creed or caste. With no difference, manual scavengers, too, have their own sort of likings, and practices of making such foods to get relaxed after their dull and daily routine which is full of filth. However, it is difficult for them to get yellow dal since it resembles the stuff they clean daily.<sup>48</sup> In a greater extend, food plays variety of roles in Dalits's life. Organizing Dalit food festivals brings joy, at the same time make an atmosphere of celebrating their culture and identity with food like tender pork, cooked only with water, salt and black paper or chicken cooked, only in beer, or mutton cooked only in rum or vegetarian food in their own style.<sup>49</sup> *An e-commerce food business under the name of Dalit Foods' has been initiated in 2016 as a start-up and social experiment 'to find out whether there are any takers for Dalit food in India'*.<sup>50</sup>

Over the period of time, Dalits have celebrated openly their liking of food for non-vegetarian cuisine particularly the ‘beef’, to raise their voice against the dominance of food and taste hierarchy. Beef became an identity-marker of assertion, social transformation, freedom, citizenship, and democracy for Dalits. There have been several conflicts, controversies, and debates around it.<sup>51</sup> There are several arguments given by Dalits in favor" of beef and non-vegetarian food. These

encompass issues of health, nutrition, economy, affordability, and aspects anchored in nature and environment. A journalist comments: 'In India, beef is usually understood to mean buffalo meat. Its high protein content and affordability make it a staple of poor folks' diet.<sup>52</sup> It is also said that much of our problems of malnutrition could be easily addressed if we regularly put beef on our tables. The National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad, in one of its catalogues makes prominent mention of beef for its 70 per cent Class I protein content. The relationship between beef—meat—vegetarian foods and generation of energy in relation to production of goods and commodities in the agrarian, artisan, and industrial economy has been highlighted. Further, the relationship between human food availability in terms of beef—meat—vegetables and the socio-cultural relations that get established in the civil societal system, including the nurturing of animals and birds around human habitats, and using their flesh for acquiring the required calories of food that sustains Dalit and their hard work has also been mentioned. System, including the nurturing of animals and birds around human habitats, and using their flesh for acquiring the required calories of food that sustains Dalit and their hard work has also been mentioned.<sup>53</sup>

## Chapter IV

### 4.1 Eco-Ambedkarism: Dalit Ecological Contestations Around Commons

Mainstream environmentalism has built its bedrock of its ecological politics on being loyal to caste and Hindu ontology. It is not likely that their concerns will be altered altogether. But, the new generation with its environmental activism and writings has started paying more emphasis on those people living on the margins of their existence with their conflicting positions. However, the analysis in this chapter has shown that the arguments and actions propounded by Dalits and anti-caste activists have not been paid serious interrogation overlapping with ecological theories and politics in India. I also attempted to show how the environmental facets of Dalit histories and politics, despite inadequate attention being paid to Dalit historiographies. Ambedkar's Mahad struggle with its aim of freeing water and reclaiming the tank conveys us, that rather than comprehending conventional environmentalism in environmental movements, our focus should be on Dalit political and social traditions to position their streams of environmentalism. Therefore, understanding Ambedkar is a fitting case in this context.

Ambedkar has been marginalized by Indian environment movement, though his thoughts and interventions on nature, village, land, agriculture, water, community, Industry and technology are some of the enduring issues of India's environmental and political traditions. In companion with Gandhi<sup>1</sup>, Nehru<sup>2</sup>, and Indira Gandhi<sup>3</sup>, who have been inspiration for environmental scholars, among the figures of historical past, Ambedkar's engagement with the environmental question has often been relatively unexplored. However, an agrarian and environmental philosophy can be constructed by bringing together Ambedkar's idea and interaction on village, land, agriculture, water, Industries, science. His significance in the modern Indian environmental movements can be relied upon his understanding, that the environment is not disentangled from the ugliness of caste injustice, and the development of rural landscape is not this connected from the social relation and structure of power in which its embedded, and where ideology to confront the transition to democracy.

While eulogizing Gandhi for intuitive critique of modernity and civilization, Ambedkar has often been discredited and criticized for his modernization vision which it is argued, drew heavily on the west for inspiration<sup>4</sup>. However, Ambedkar's vision of modernity has heralded new tradition of Dalit development and environmental thought by centering, Dalits, who were outside the eco-space and intellectual domain, and by being critical to dominant discourse which is devoid of any concern with how the natural world can be transformed to address the problems generated in a social world of caste oppression.

#### **4.1.1 Ambedkar's personal experiences with the natural world**

Ambedkar's interaction with other human beings and his interaction with environment during his childhood and youth were cursed by injustice. Even Ambedkar lived in the army cantonment in his early age, Rest of the world has constantly refrained his interaction with the ecological world by making him remain in his assigned place.<sup>5</sup>

Ambedkar perceived his Mahar caste and village as inherently unequal for the untouchables, invoking physical and moral stress for them as almost every village unexceptionally had its Maharwada (Mahar quarters), in the Marathi speaking areas of west central India. The Mahar caste had ascribed Mahar's the status of inferior village servant without any special skill or crafts, and made them to perform several necessary duties for the villages<sup>6</sup>.

Ambedkar saw caste in water as it turned polluted as soon as he touched it. Rural and urban landscapes in India like offices, schools, streets, houses, etc. were the places of caste oppression and Dalit aspiration simultaneously, for Ambedkar. Ambedkar was usually made to squat in a corner of the class on a piece of gunny cloth, which he carried to school. No hotel or hostel accepted Ambedkar when he came to Baroda. He came to Baroda while working for the Baroda state, his subordinates flung the bundles of file and hurled papers at his desk to avoid his touch. After knowing his caste, the Parsi inn in Baroda asked him to vacate. Ambedkar says:

*“No Hindu, no Muslim would give him shelter in the city. He sent a note to the Maharaja, who referred him to the Diwan, and the Diwan expressed his inability to do anything in the matter. Tired, hungry and fagged out, he sat under a tree and burst into a flood of tears”.*<sup>7</sup>

Despite stories of horrors and hardships embedded in his environmental experiences (mediated by ties of caste), His fascination for different landscapes, interest in gardening,

purchasing new plants, feeling lost when his pet dog.<sup>8</sup> fell ill brings him closer to nature and makes him a natural lover.

However, Ambedkar's understanding of nature goes beyond his personal experiences and made him deal with three inter connected meanings of nature: External, Universal, and Social. Ambedkar described external nature as-

*“useful materials from the earth, the soil or water and (is used in) the form of hunting, fishing, stock-raising, lumbering and mining...(WE) extract from the physical world useful materials which become the original sources of man's subsistence’.*<sup>9</sup>

The external nature, according to Ambedkar, with societal interaction provides a strong basis for basic material production, and converts nature into a purposefully useful process by transforming and in turn impacting society and human relation.

Secondly, the universal nature encompasses all ‘natural’ things which dominated and determined the structure of the society with its supposed ‘naturalness’ and ‘natural laws’. This for Ambedkar was *“the Hindu scheme of governance enshrined in written constitution..... a divine Code which lays down the rules which govern the religious, ritualistic and social life of the Hindus in minute detail.”*<sup>10</sup>

Thirdly, the social nature was the nature of social exclusion, where traditional was aligned with the natural and carried with it exclusion, discrimination, and injustice. Ambedkar mentioned it as the untouchables’ *“isolation discrimination and unfriendliness of social environment.”*<sup>11</sup>

Thus, for Ambedkar this external, universal, and social manifestations of nature deeply impact its interface with humans. Past and politics of exploitative casteists relations were concealed through ideologies of universal and social nature making Ambedkar critical about them.

#### **4.1.2 Social colonialism and the new life**

Ambedkar renounced the idea of Hindu creation of humans and nature and was also critical of the casteists’ environmental determinism. He questioned the Brahmanical Hindu understanding of nature and its laws that saw untouchability as its natural corollary and denounced the organicist logic of nature and its scheme which “not only regards class composition as natural and ideal but regards it as sacred and divine.”<sup>12</sup>



Therefore, he attempted to bring a notional change by changing the very notion of such a natural life, as he categorically wrote in his outstanding work, *Annihilation of Caste*: “new life can enter only in a new body. The old body must die before a new body can come into existence and a new life can enter into it. To put it simply the old must cease to be operative before the new can begin to enliven and to pulsate. That is what I meant when I said you must discard the authority of the Shastras and destroy the religion of the Shastras.”<sup>13</sup>

Meera Nanda explaining Ambedkar’s appreciation of scientifically justified laws of nature which can challenge the Hindu ontology. She says as follows:

*“Hindu ontology does not separate matter or physical nature from the spirit of the moral realm, action in the moral realm are admitted as eliciting equal reactions in the physical realm. Thus, asserted ‘karmic’ crimes can bring about anything from birth as an untouchable, to natural disaster as earthquake, floods, drought, disease, etc. this peculiar nature of metaphysics which rationalizes injustices and misfortunes as a natural consequence of workings of loss of nature”.*<sup>14</sup>

Ambedkar’s relationship with the ecological world was centered around his perceptions of village and community, which for him, together imposed control on nature and human labor. Colonialists, nationalists, sociologists, anthropologists, and environmentalists, economists, have conceived the Indian village society and community in various ways:

Some colonial and western writers, for instance, Sir Charls Matcalfe, and a section of Indian thinkers and leaders opined that the Indian village as an ideal place of social organization, with village communities functioning as a little republic (some colonialist and nationalist ); as an epitome of harmony (sociologist and Anthropologist)<sup>15</sup>; village as an embodiment of tradition and ideal place of homogeneity, harmony and self-sufficiency, and as a highly integrated ‘agrosylvo pastoral system’, (environmentalist).<sup>16</sup> However, Ambedkar had a divergent understanding of the village and perceived it as a place of oppression,( in contrast to Gandhi, who saw village as a site authenticity and symbolize harmony), representation of exploitation and a highly imbalanced economic and ecological system. Jodhka reminds that “*out of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar,*

*Ambedkar was the only one who had a first-hand experience of village life and that to looking at it from below as a Dalit child.*"<sup>17</sup>

For Ambedkar, Indian villager epitomize as a model of Hindu social organization, *"the working plant of Hindu social order where one could see the Hindu social order in operation in full swing"*.<sup>18</sup>

Centrality of such a village is the control of habitations, natural resources and economy, not only to continue the Hindu social order but also its politico-economic standing.

Therefore, village was not a single social unit for Ambedkar rather it was divided into touchables and untouchables; where touchables are inside the village enjoying economic dominancy, while untouchables are outside the village suffering marginalization.

Villages embody 'social colonialism': thus, Ambedkar concluded: *"such is the picture of the inside life in an Indian village. In this republic, there is no place democracy. There is no room for equality. There is no room for liberty and there is no room for fraternity. The Indian village is the very negation of a republic. If it is a republic, it is a republic of the touchables by the touchable and for the touchables. The republic is an empire of the Hindus over the untouchables. It is the kind of colonialism of the Hindu designed to exploit the untouchables. The untouchables have no rights. They are there only to wait, serve and submit. They are there to do or to die. They have no rights because they are outside the village republic and because they are outside the so-called republic, they are outside the Hindu fold."*<sup>19</sup>

Villages represent eco-Brahminism: attached to a Hindu village, according to Ambedkar, there exists an untouchable settlement that is economically without any resources and without any opportunity for improvement. Therefore, Ambedkar suggests that;

*"the village system must, therefore, be broken. It is the only way that is open for untouchables if they really wish to emancipate themselves from the stronghold which the Hindus have acquired over them through the village system. My suggestion is that you should insist upon a provision being made in the constitution for the formation of new and independent villages exclusively of the untouchables at the public cost, to be undertaken by the Central Government."*<sup>20</sup>

Thus, Ambedkar from his earlier writings on the village to his responses to the debates in the constituent assembly highlighted a different, less celebratory theme in Indian thought, conceptualizing the country side not as golden, harmonious and innocent, but as

a land of Hindu oppression and command that should not be treated as basic unit of Indian civilization or constitution.<sup>21</sup>

Mukul Sharma remarks: “environmentalists have also often located community as a natural preserve of tradition as outside modernity, as emblematic of egalitarianism, homogeneity, and cooperation, and as offering an effective challenge to the developmental model. Quixotic imaginations of community are repeatedly reiterated without interweaving them with questions of caste, hierarchy and imbalanced share in nature. For example, Aseem Srivastav, Ashish Kothari have recently stated: ‘the hundreds of Indian traditional communities fighting for their land and resources today have traditionally obeyed simple principle of ecological balance’.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to such celebration of the existence and practices of community, Ambedkar focused on how caste and untouchability has affected community and how Hindu society as such is not a community but only collection of castes.

Thus, Ambedkar attempted to find a ‘New Community’ and proposed conversion as one of the means for searching and building this new community for and of untouchables. As he stated-

*“the one and the only way to end their social isolation is for the untouchables to establish kinship with and get themselves incorporated into another community which is free from the spirit of caste.”<sup>23</sup>*

#### **4.1.3 Democratic agrarianism in Ambedkar:**

Ambedkar has devoted his significant strength in putting forth his ‘agrarian vision’ which represents: his deep-rooted aspirations of Dalits to land ownership and land reforms, his demands for independence and equality enjoyed by other high caste farmers; his emphasis on freeing water from the clutches of masters’ control and his attempts to establish Dalit’s control over the ‘natural’ world from a position of individual independence, political, and social equality.

Ambedkar’s explicit denial of a romanticized vision of rural life was based on his preference for a hard headed social, political, and economic analysis. He very often constructed his concerns on natural resources as civil rights issues, expressing his belief that access to environmental resources and freedom from environmental inequalities are

crucial to a good life and should be available to all, which is also a conjecture that informs the contemporary environmental justice movements as well.

Ambedkar launched a general attack on caste society and colors of nature and laid the grounds for democratic rural developments by drawing from history on what we can recognize as basic democratic agrarian principles like rights over natural resources, moral and economic value of labor, demand for economic and political equality and value of individual independence.

Ambedkar's thought centered around land and agriculture for the transformation of Indian agrarianism. He was very much concerned about ideas and actions designed to change systems of land holdings, revenue, distribution, records, and forest land from the perspective of landless, farmers and untouchables. Ambedkar's emphasis on land ownership invoked a major stand on Indian intellectual and agrarian tradition. For instance, through various efforts in the assembly and outside, by making resolutions and legislations, he wanted to abolish the oppressive Watandar Mahar system in Maharashtra and also challenged the Khoti system, a land tenure system in the Bombay presidency.

Developing complex political and economic arguments on issues of land revenue, land holdings, land acquisition, land records, forest land, small farms and farmers, and cooperative farming, Ambedkar laid a path for the future rural society with an ecological sensibility. For example, about the problems of scattered and small farms, Ambedkar had serious concerns about the excessive subdivision and fragmentation of agricultural holdings and he wanted to achieve it through comprehensive scheme of consolidation.

Ambedkar opined that whether the farmer is economic or uneconomic doesn't necessarily depend upon its size as the economies vary with other factors of production like labor and capital.

Ambedkar, was very much vocal on the acquisition and improvement of land for village sites, wished that the tracts of forest land to be allotted to the depressed classes, concerned about the availabilities of grazing, emphasized the necessity of land records, questioned the advent of chemical fertilizers and artificial manures, complained about the insufficiency of useful cattle and organic manures, advocated that, state should own the agriculture sector and cultivate the farms as collective farms and finance them through the supply of water, implements, manure and seeds. During the late 1950s and 60s,

Zelliet notes that his legacy was counted upon in the massive land Satyagraha and ‘anti starvation’ protests in Maharashtra.<sup>24</sup>

One can find instances of invoking people for political action in Ambedkar writings, revealing his quest for agrarian justice centered on land. *“The untouchables should leave the villages and wherever they find fallow land, they should capture it and start forming. If anybody tries to stop them they should resist and claim their ownership by paying appropriate land revenue to the government. This way they should live with dignity in their own new society.”*<sup>25</sup>

The burning of Manusmriti and Mahad satyagraha symbolize Dalits’ and Ambedkar struggles with water. Assertion of untouchable’s rights to take water from the public watering place was not only the core of Mahad satyagraha but also the defining moments in Ambedkar’s thought and political action. To conclude in the words of Mukul Sharma, *“Thought provoking interpretation of the mahad satyagraha, however can be complemented through the lens of ‘democratic agrarianism’ and environmental egalitarianism. This struggle also symbolized a marriage between untouchables, agrarian ethos and environmental traditions. The centrality of water for untouchables, and the abuse and misuse of public water bodies became a converging point for divergent traditions, putting forward humane theory of democratic agrarianism”*.<sup>26</sup>

#### **4.1.4 Compassionate democracy**

Democratic agrarianism and democratization of development are closely linked for Ambedkar, as he perceived development in the context of gaining language of rights-equality, freedom, dignity, self-respect and recognition. Modernism for Ambedkar is committed to reason, scientific knowledge, and democracy.

Ambedkar’s point of entry, into the natural world, was devoid of land, labor and dignity, so usually framed through access and as the untouchables encounter the nature through caste and inequality, their resolution for him, was contingent upon and alteration of natural power relations, production, practices and system of meaning and relation, and economic structures. Better comprehend his view on modernity and development; we need consider broader historical, social, and political context in which he developed his ideas. However, the immediate context was provided by the independence movement and march towards freedom, democracy, and development. Key to a cardinal solution of socio-economic problem lies, according to Ambedkar’s development imagination in a social reconstruction of the existence and occupation of Dalits on principles of

collectivism and planned development. In the process Ambedkar questioned the idea of a 'return to nature' as he was sure, that a return to past and to nature go together because implicit in such a return is the practice of pre-industrial or rural modes of material production, rather than its total rejection. Therefore, for Ambedkar, such a situation, if realize, would lead to liquidation of existence and development of untouchables as laborers, because the main thing that distinguishes them from high caste touchables are precisely the possibilities of labor as individual and social units and this distinction, moreover, also conditions all other important differences between social and natural phenomena.

Exploitation of nature through industries, for many Dalit involved better utilization of their labor. Through the agency of industry and production, the untouchable labor, gets in a reciprocal relation with nature. Liberating the labor from the clutches of caste has two interconnected trends: first, a constructive one linked with the possibilities of fulfilling individual's material and spiritual needs and: second, a destructive one, where realization leads to the breaking of entry and work barriers for Dalits. thus, attempting to understand Ambedkar's views on environment and development not only provide layers and nuances to the environmental thought, but also have partially explain some of the roots of the environmental justice movement in India, which involves Dalits rights over natural resources and their cry for right development. Therefore, it is worth noting that the language and rhetoric on the environmental justice movement was not invented in 1980s.

#### **4.1.5 Commons: Extending the Environmental Legacy of Ambedkar**

Indian environmental discourses have maintained rich accounts through various instances in history on how commons have been essential for the survival, living, conservation, and enhancement of people, environmental and rural life. There are also documentations on how commons have been taken over by the state and the corporate sector for industrial and commercial purposes while being supplemented by intense conflicts over common spaces in different parts of the country. Indian environmental scholars have also placed equal focus on natural resource management and their ecological sustainability.

An enquiry on CPRs has been carried out by NSSO (National Sample Survey Organization) in its 54<sup>th</sup> round of survey during January to June 1998: this was considered

as the official attempt in the country to provide state and national level estimate of size, utilization and contribution of CPRs. NSSO defines commons as resources like grazing grounds, villages, forest and wood lots, wastelands, ponds, rivers, tanks etc. which are meant for commons use of the villagers and claimed that in pre-British India the rural population has free access to large part of the country's natural resources which were controlled by the local communities. However, with the state extending its control over these resources, the availability of CPRs to villagers declined substantially, and followed by a simultaneous decline of community management systems. It is to be noted that the NSSO's enquiry estimated the magnitude of CPRs in land only.<sup>27</sup>

However, N.S. Jodha has extended the research on commons to include forests, pasture lands and water resources too. He says that the reason for CPRs receiving less attention from the planners despite their significant contributions to the economy of rural poor, is the large emphasis that the rural development planning has placed on private resource centered activities like promotion of high yielding crop varieties or distribution of cross bred cattle, or supply of electricity for ground water devices.<sup>28</sup>

Madhav Gadgil and Ram Chandra Guha have seen CPRs as part and parcel of India's rich and vibrant tradition of community based management system, where villagers manage their own land, water and forest, with strong elements of equitable sharing and democratic decision making.<sup>29</sup>

Of late, ocean fisheries and fisher folk have also been perceived as common spaces. John Kurien and T.R. Thankappan Achari explored the causes and consequences of conflict between artisan fisherfolk and large trawlers off the Kerala coast and highlighted how a combo of economic, technological and social factors resulted in an overuse of coastal ecosystem and the fish therein.<sup>30</sup>

There are also stories of people's struggles for their common lands when government deprives people's access to common lands by giving them to joint companies for plantation of eucalyptus.<sup>31</sup>

Struggle to save forest lands by thousands of tribals of Udaipur, Dungarpur, Banswara and Chittor districts in Rajasthan from overzealous government have also been documented.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, having very little to offer in terms of the relationship between common places and environment on the one hand and caste system and Dalits on the other, Indian environmental discourses have hardly realized that Dalits have none or very few rights over commons, and that CPRs need to be managed with more justice and equality.

Dalits thinkers, academicians, and activists have comprehended distinct meanings and imaginations of public places, commons and CPRs intertwining them with social and structural inequalities. However, such alternative imaginations have not entered mainstream environmentalism.

Dalits have brought to the fore, the strange semantics of the word ‘common’ in Indian polity while understanding ‘common well’ as one from which untouchables cannot draw water, a ‘common funeral ground’ means a place where a body of untouchables cannot be cremated and a ‘common market’ is where an untouchable cannot even sit.<sup>33</sup>

Narrations of struggles of Dalits over public places have been documented by Dalit writers and historians focusing on both present and colonial periods. For instance, T.H.P. Chentharassery, chronicled several struggles around public places in Kerala as struggles of freedom.<sup>34</sup>

The influence of space on Dalit’s lives and thinking is so overarching, that it is argued that in the case of Ambedkar and even Gandhi, space determined the emergence and efficiency of their thoughts.

Gopal Guru concluded that: *“physical aspects spaces which are otherwise empty get constructed through negative and positive meaning depending upon who is assigning this meaning. In India, it was the socially powerful who till the arrival of the colonial modernity assigned meaning to the spaces they inhabited (Agrahara [area of the village inhabited the Brahmins]) and also to the spaces that they did not reside in but held in deep repulsion (cherry [at the end of colour spectrum, used for Dalit locality in Gujarat], hulgeri [Dalit locality in Gujarat] and maharwada [a locality of the Mahar community] or chamar tola [a locality of the Chamar community]). But the enabling aspect of colonial modernity empowered the untouchables to seek new meaning for their physical space (Bhimnagar, Budhawada, Ramabainagar and Saidhartnagar)”* 35

The markers of caste are more visible in Dalit discourses. Caste structured in many ways, villages determine power relations. Exclusivity in caste spaces manifested exclusivity in control over common spaces – forests, common lands, ponds, and streets. Being



vulnerable in such spaces, Dalits are subjected to repeated violence and their presence leading to even greater violence.

The basic tenets of space in the structure of village settlements are understood by Ambedkar as follows: “It is a case of territorial segregation and of a cordon sanitaire putting the impure people inside the barbed wire into a sort of cage. Every Hindu village is a ghetto. The Hindu lives in the village and untouchables live in the ghetto.”<sup>36</sup>

Such a casteists ghettoization, according to several researchers, had a long past, where Dalits had no claims over common spaces, and such spaces were central to the dominance of rulers and their exercise of power. For instance, a research conducted by Noburu Karashima<sup>37</sup>, on two large stone inscriptions in a big temple at Thanjavour and the inscription in the Gangaikonda Cholapuram (GKC) temple in Tamil Nadu reveals that people belonging to certain castes had separate habitations (inscriptions mention Theenda-cheri; settlement of untouchable), dismantling the idea that Indian villages were little republics and self-sufficient and invoking D.R.Nagaraj to state that ‘one should transform the villages totally as a livable and human place’.<sup>38</sup>

Dalits’ consideration of entry into city as a leap into a new world space symbolizing freedom from caste segregation, an escape from persecution, a journey towards a promised land;<sup>39</sup> and an ever willingness to defy the pastoralists or the environmentalist’s negative vision of the society”.<sup>40</sup>

The task of reconstructing the common spaces has been the central task for Dalits and their organizations, case in point is the installation of statues of Ambedkar. Dalits are arresting their right to be recognized in public spaces through images and statues. Gary Michael Tartakov through his research on the politics of Ambedkar statues in Maharashtra, states, that the point is not, they say, where Babasaheb comes from, but where he went and where Dalits need to go. It is an image of a literate man, one who learned to read and write and made his success in the modern town.<sup>41</sup>

However, such a restructuring of common spaces through installation of statues are not devoid of contestations and violence. Installation is often followed by desecration as powerful castes perceive it as potential threat.<sup>42</sup>

While studying the public monuments in Uttarpradesh under the rule of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Badri Naryan covered a broad range of installation (of statues of Kabir,

Ekalavya, and Ravidas in Lucknow, Varnasi, Agra, Allahabad, and at cross roads and squares of whole of Uttarpradesh); construction, (of Dalit memorials of Ambedkar, Phule, chattrapati Shahuji Maharaj, Kanshi Ram, Buddha, and Ramabai, in public spaces of Luknow and Noida); and inauguration (of the Bahujan Samaj Prerna Kendra in Lucknow in 2005) to contend that the monuments are statements against the symbolic exclusion of Dalits from public spaces and concludes that: “redesigning of the public space should not be seen as some kind of Tuglaqi madness in Mayawati and Kanshi Ram but as a strategic move in the mission to restore the self-esteem and identity of Dalits in the society”.<sup>43</sup>

Maxine Loynd conducted an insightful study on the ‘Bahujan Samaj Prerna Kendra’ in Uttar Pradesh and on the role of space and place in political mobilization, to tell us how: “the design and use of public space implicitly excludes lower classes and caste, and way in which the BSP has both challenged political discourse”.<sup>44</sup>

#### **4.1.6 Individual endeavors around a common: Dashrath Manjhi, ‘the mountain man’ and the concept of ‘new commons’**

We are informed by scholars about a person, who independently and single handedly brought down a 360-foot long and 25-foot-high hill, and created a 16 foot wide pass in place of an almost impenetrable common, natural, hilly space, who was a Mushar and a Kamia (bonded labourer) named Dashhrath Manjhi. A novel titled ‘Pahar’ was written by a Hindi-writer Nilay Upadhyay basing on the life of Dashrath manjhi. He informs us that, “*Manjhi embraced nature and society together and opened up possibilities for establishing a new perspective and relationship between humans and the environments.*”<sup>45</sup>

Mukul Sharma, the author of ‘Caste and Nature’ notes that: “*Manjhi demonstrated with a difference how three principal figures of common space-land, mountain, and road-can become catalyst for social and cultural revitalization of people. His mission also marks significant variations in Dalit environmental imagination. Manjhi’s journey through places, images, stories, poems, village, landowners, and family shows a deep quest to claim and change the common space.*”<sup>46</sup>

An important question to be thought about is, can we consider Dashrath Manjhi as harbinger of a distinct ecological sensibility, even before the articulation of formal Indian environmentalism.

Though commons portrayed elements of natural environment, their meanings stretched alternative visions for Manjhi to signify the essence of human society and what it ought to be. Centred on the moral value of labor his conception of earth and life remained an overarching concern in his thought. There are narratives of labor abounding around Dasrath manjhi: *“somebody asked, ‘O Dashrath! What are you doing?’ Dashrath replied in a matter-of-fact voice, ‘Can’t you see? I am breaking the mountain.’ And he had the same response to the question asked of him in different ways hundreds of times. People also gave continuous advice: ‘A single man can never break a mountain’; ‘You cannot take care of your family. What do you think you can do with a mountain?’; ‘Why are you wasting your labor? instead, take care of your children and family.’ Manjhi continued to concentrate on his labor without wasting time in arguments or answers.”*<sup>47</sup>

Manjhi’s labor created fresh landscapes and cultivated new virtues and received moral significance as it connected the physical and social worlds. While exercising his labor, Manjhi didn’t complain against the landed and the rich, who with their innumerable resources could have initiated and supported the cutting of the mountain. As Dashrath remarked: *“they had wealth, but no soul; so, the mountain remained as it was, without a scratch on it. In fact, if you have to cut down the mountain, you have to be six feet taller than the mountain, if you have to measure up the depth of the sea, you have to be somewhat deeper than the sea itself. Real wealth is as tall as it is made out to be. Nobody is taller than a human being. He maintained, ‘Soul and hand- these two constitute warp and woof of the world. If someone develops the skill of using the two properly, nothing will be impossible formhim”*<sup>48</sup>

Manjhi’s efforts and labor around a ‘common’- a mountain- have to be celebrated not only as a story of tremendous human resilience but also needs to understand and contextualized in an ecological framework, with natural, social, and physical meanings.

Illustrating the bonded and labor histories of Dalits, a critical factor in their access to the natural world and their perception of nature, Manjhi, maintained a layered relationship with nature, which also influenced his action around the commons. The unsurpassable mountain was not only a constant remainder of his degraded status but also represented economic, environmental and physical challenges. Manjhi negotiated with it on an everyday basis as kamia to reach his work place.

For Manjhi, though mountain symbolized many personal losses and pains, he considered working on the mountain as his very own common space, which he could appropriate, carve and break through his labor.

Mukul Sharma notes that: *“as a Musahar, he was an environmental ‘other’ in the village, with almost no rights over the common forests and land resources of the mountain, in which caste domination and unequal resources distribution was permanent. Simultaneously, his experience of casteism and untouchability crisscrossed with his ecological understanding, formulated within the ambit of individual and collective feelings around nature.”*<sup>49</sup>

Facing the challenges of everyday environmental stress and extreme hardship of commons with indomitable will, Manjhi proved to be an extraordinary, courageous and selfless person. Manjhi was deeply uncomfortable with the forms and practices personified in the commons, as they carried within them exclusion, fear, isolation, bondage, pain, thirst, hunger and caste injustice.

At the same time, *“it was through ecological symbols, meanings and idioms-water, sea, mountain, bird, rain- that he expressed himself, as he felt intrinsically bound with them.”*<sup>50</sup>

Thus, one can consider Dashrath Manjhi as the harbinger of a district ecological responsibility, even before the articulation of formal Indian environmentalism, as he desired, loved, worked and lived for a new common unbound by the burdens of old. Manjhi’s creation of new commons can be perceived as the silent endeavor of Dalit thinking on environment. Representing an attempt at the universalization of space, Manjhi’s effort symbolized Dalit activism and thought. Removing the strain of pollution from spatial relations, for Dalits, is to also universalize space as something that is to be accessible to all and hence to be shared by all.

#### **4.1.7 Eco narrative of Una movement: a struggle for land**

Nature of occupation, practice of untouchability and marriage are continued to be determined by the caste identity in India. Case in point is the Una incident of Gujarat, where four Dalit youth were subjected to physical violence by a group of right-wing Hindu cow vigilantes, it is said, who have organized themselves in the form of Gau Rakshak Dals (cow protection units). The issue became visible when the Dalit youth were skinning a cow, which is an occupation that lower caste communities have been practicing. The assumption of the assailants was that these youths had killed cow for the

meat, triggering the largest Dalit movement to fight against caste based oppression in the recent history. One will be fascinated to know the claim made by the Una Dalit Atyachar Ladat Samiti (a committee to fight against the caste based atrocities in Una) was that they will volunteer to forgo their caste- prescribed occupation of cleaning dead carcasses and manual scavenging, but as an alternative, they demand land for Dalits which has not reached them despite the land reforms that have been experienced in Gujarat.

This can be considered as a regretting moment in the Indian environmental politics where right-wing Hindutva's sentiments of protecting the cow took on a militant form. As explained by Gail Omvedt, that there is a deep alienation between two of the most authentic social movements in India: the anti-caste movement and the environment movement, in her article- "why Dalits dislike environmentalists."<sup>51</sup>

Intrinsically linking the practice of caste based occupation of skinning dead cows to the violence that the Dalit youth were subjected to, the movement challenged the caste – induced labor constraints on Dalits and opened a new avenue of demands for land. In many ways such a development can bridge the alienation between the two movements.

It is worth noting that the right-wing Hindu environmental sentiment primarily focused on the protection of cows doesn't acknowledge the cultural practice of beef consumption. In this context, Sharmila Rege, in her seminal work, *Isn't this plate Indian?*<sup>52</sup> argues that "in a caste based society like India, foods eaten constitute one of the key elements that distinguish the most valued attributes from the lowest valued one in terms of pure and impure within the pyramidal structure of the caste system."

On the axis of caste, food has been politicized and the plate has been purified through historical efforts of banning cow slaughter and dousing the consumption of beef in the environmental politics of changing our diet to protect animals.

Ambedkar, in *the untouchables: who were they and how they became untouchables?* argues that "*the consumption of beef and animal sacrifice, which is an aspect present in most Hindu scriptures, was thawed away from its practices to prevent the popularization of Buddhism which denounced animal sacrifice. The cow which was earlier sacrificed now became sacred and needed protection.*"<sup>53</sup>

Hindu environmentalism seeks the protection of cow as it is sacred and fits within the frame of contemporary environmental movements who fight for animal rights and

welfare. Cow protection is also linked to economic arguments like protection of livelihoods of the farmers by yielding milk, digging of soil, medicinal value of the urine, usage of cow dung for biogas. Though such economic arguments are valid but they are also one divided into pure and impure, and they do not take into consideration the lower caste based economic priorities, where they eke out a living by skinning dead cows and clearing their carcasses. Therefore, the stand by the Una Dalit Atyachar Ladat Samiti is an interesting one, which stated that the material basis of reliance on the cow ban be done away with, but they made a claim for land, which is an important claim given that property rights were historically derived to Dalits based on their caste. These communities were not impacted by the desirable land reforms in Gujarat. Thus, it is argued by the Dalit movement, that if the cow needs to protect, then the economic dependency of the lower caste communities will have to be shifted from skinning cows to having the land. This campaign is shaped by the slogan “keep the cow’s tail and give us our land back.” The ecological argument, on the same lines of economic argument defends caste based occupations and ignores marginalization and discrimination. It is argued by Gadgil and Malhotra that the caste system plays a role in limiting conflict over natural resources and thus has an ecological function, if not justification.<sup>54</sup> Such an assessment however ignores the social discrimination that is embedded in maintaining the caste system, and, its occupational markers. If the Mahad Satyagraha (march led by Ambedkar in 1927) symbolized a struggle to gain access to water in public wells, this struggle now is for land, having the potential to reshape environmental justice politics by infusing it with the caste based struggle for access to resources, while also in the process, simultaneously signaling a move away from the right-wing Hindu sentiment of protection of the cow, which criminalizes Dalit occupations and diets.

#### **4.1.8 Dalit Egalitarian Water Ecological Vision**

Water is a deeply contentious issue, intersecting with caste, class and gender in India in multiple ways and producing complex cultural meanings and social hierarchies. Culturally, politically and economically it has been a source of power. It has controlled by powerful and used to exert control over others. It has been a traditional medium for exclusion of Dalits in overt and covert ways: denying Dalits right over, and access to water; asserting monopoly of upper castes over water bodies, including rivers, wells, tanks, and taps; constructing water texts in cultural and religious domains; obscuring

Dalit narratives and knowledge of; and rendering thinking and speaking about caste, water, and Dalits together as peripheral to discourses on water.

This section takes up water, central to environmental paradigms, and narrates how one specific aspect of human relationship with nature can be changed by caste, and how this caste discourse on a natural resource can encourage Dalits to articulate their own traditions. In other words, it examines the politics, availability, and ecology of water through caste. It shows how notions of untouchability, impurity, pollutants, and dirt drive the culture, institutions, and practices around water, which sustain deep inequalities and discrimination against Dalits. By seeing castes in water, Dalits interrogate the religion, cultures, institutions, practices, and policies that create inequalities within and between castes. Simultaneously, by interrogating caste division in water, Dalits and their organizations invoke their won symbols, histories and struggles on the ground, which unravel their distinct cultural politics of water, through case studies of GMA and Lok Shakti Sangathan (LSS), in two different locations of Bihar. This chapter also explores how water is not just a natural, given, source of life and death, but is also an institution, a social and cultural system, with specific meanings for Dalits. It examines how and why Dalits search for water rights gets allied to their historical memories, caste status, and cultural-religious icons like Ekalavya and Deena-Bhadri. It seeks to show how Dalits employ their water politics to question caste and the social and economic power of the upper caste.

Indian environmental discourses widely demonstrate scientific, historical, political, practical, regional, international, religious, cultural, and artistic nature of the water issues. Since the 1980s, different editions of the state of India's environment reports have outlined the various issues surrounding water in the country<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, mountains, valleys, rivers, and rivers systems have inspired environmentalist's consciousness.<sup>56</sup> Significantly, Indian environmentalists have also critiqued big dams intermeshing with displacement and resettlement issues; unfolded the politics of large dams, transnational dynamics, coalitions, networks, and struggles around big dams; Bhilala adivasis struggles against Sardar Sarovar Dam; Tehri Dam construction over Ganga<sup>57</sup>. Additionally, environmentalists also deliberated upon coastal waters, livelihood insecurities of fisher folk; the blue revolution and its environmental and social disruption and bloody conflicts<sup>58</sup>. Moreover, Dalit ecological perspectives, experiences, and

knowledge on water have rarely entered mainstream environmental understanding, policies, and movements, thus providing only partial frames on water.

Ecological sustainability of traditional water conservation and collective community management; the decline of traditional water harvesting systems, and their management; communitarian trends in conservation and management of natural resources have also been prominent subject of discussion for Indian environmentalists<sup>59</sup>. Such nostalgic and romantic accounts, however, overlook the fact that traditional water management systems have not been equal regarding water culture. Rather they are embedded in deeply structured hierarchies of caste, based on control, power, and dominant religious rituals which are intermeshed in an invisible line of caste presuppositions. Inequality and injustice have been inbuilt in the making, managing, and distribution of such systems, both in the past and at the present.

Renowned eco-feminist Vandana Shiva perceives it as a time of ‘water wars’ in the context of globalization, liberalization, and market economy where the definition of water is shifting from common property to private good, to be extracted and traded freely where corporations are vehemently converting free flowing water into bottled profits<sup>60</sup>.

*“Yet, in spite of environmentalists’ mammoth contribution, they have often closed their eyes to the caste of water, and its linkages to touch, purity-pollution, the holy-unholy, and the sacred-profane. It is rather striking that the growing body of environmental scholarship on water, while discussing matters of culture, conservation, community, people, tradition, distribution, market, society, and economy, has often made no mention of Dalits.”<sup>61</sup>*

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Hindu Brahmanical scriptures<sup>62</sup>, and Hindu orthodox practices<sup>63</sup> are colored water with caste, making it as a critical medium to mark purity-pollution of the body and establish socio-ritual purification. Ideas of ritual purity and pollution, and daily practices and habits of drinking, bathing, fishing, and transportation have been profoundly affected by caste, sanctifying the naturalness of water order in Indian society. Caste and Hindu religion have critically come into play when determining Dalits’ contact with water, resulting in a tense relationship between water, dominant Hindu discourses, and Dalits. Thus, water has been an association of domination on the one hand, and marginalization and exclusion on the other.



While searching for the ecological underpinnings of Hinduism, several streams of environmental conscience too have come to espouse traditional Hindu concepts of water and sacred rivers. Drawing from the Rig Veda, Bhagvad Gita, Ramayana, and Manusmriti, environmentalists often enmesh water with Hinduism to strengthen the meanings and power of water. They sometimes do so in a culturally engaging, creative, and evocative manner to reflect on the personal and collective meanings and practices of water. Sadly, caste and Dalits are left on the margins. Descriptions of Narmada, Yamuna, and Ganga as holy, as important pilgrimages and as goddesses are pertinent to such thought.<sup>64</sup>

There is also a mention of stories of King Bhagirath, The Great Flood of Manu and Indra as powerful warrior in the environmental literature.<sup>65</sup> Some of the pioneering environmentalist of the country affirm the religious and cultural construction of water to chart out their environmental politics. They too see water as sacred, as a manifestation of divine gods, as a synonym of mother, and as a *tirtha*, a sacred bridge to the divine. For example, Vandana Shiva celebrates the tradition role that water has historically played in communities, and highlights peoples' alternatives based on examples from successful campaigns. In her own words, "*Protection of vital resources cannot be ensured through market logic alone. It demands a recovery of the sacred and a recovery of the commons. And these recoveries are happening.*"<sup>66</sup>

The Chipko leader, Sunderlal Bahuguna, in his long-standing opposition to the Tehri Dam in Garhwal, constantly invoked visions of Ganga as a holy mother, also connecting it to ideas of national security and unity.<sup>67</sup> In such environmental writings, there is an implicit continuity between the purity of water and that of the body, where both are prone to pollution by 'others', which need purging and cleansing. Water here is not just life, cultural, or universe; it is also a maker of inner, pure, God-given nature, and recuperate and preserver of inviolability of body and mind. These bind the individual, community, and nation, and build a cohesive collective identity. However, within such imagination is also contained a fear, and disgust with pollution and polluters, where the impurities of particles and people are perceived to be at the root of the ills in society. Inferentially, such thought creates one of the cores of a casteists identity.

Academic work, of late, has taken cognizance of ecological narratives of caste and Dalits in water. Found in a multitude of forms, texts, and archives, these studies express

ecological experience of water historically, which were informed by caste, social, local, and regional relationships. They explore the everyday lived ecological experiences of Dalits, at times through their own words and images. They unearth how existing power and authority, and dominant economy and polity perceived and portrayed water and Dalits. Caste has been a prominent, almost an inherent, factor in water. Water is a marker of our caste society. In some regions, people are broadly divided into two groups – *pani chalne jati* (castes from whom drinking water can be accepted) and *pani na chalne jati* (castes from whom drinking water cannot be accepted) <sup>68</sup>.

Deprivation of, and exclusion from, water acts as a caste lock on Dalits, and they have innumerable narratives and experience around it. Deprived for the most part from the sources and resources of water, Dalits have lived with water in a state of alienation, with painful memories of punishment. At the same time, their affiliations with water in their being and living has provided them with resources of humanity and imagination. Water as an important cultural symbol also provides redemptive possibilities whereby Dalits go beyond the oppressive social fabric and develop their own positive association with a natural resource.

Many of the Dalit autobiographies have grueling and painful accounts of lack of access to water and water bodies. The severity of these restrictions to water fields informed Dalits' notions of themselves as human beings and their relationship to non-human nature and natural resources. Growing in a Mahar community, a well-known Dalit writer, Sharankumr Limbale gives a first-person account of his childhood anguish <sup>69</sup>

Archetypal patterns of Dalits' quest for water are revealed in varied ways in self-narratives, poems, and novels, water is not a natural beauty here, but a cast burden. It is not a source of joy, but a cultural curse. A prominent Tamil Dalit playwright, K.A. Gunasekaran, in an early chapter of his autobiography reveals his 'scar' from water <sup>70</sup>.

Such eco-narratives of Dalits are also located within social world of water, where the question of water cannot be separated from social hierarchies, and the distribution of water reveals the actual functioning of caste in our society, according to the late Komal Kothari. He stated "*Upper caste communities in the desert region have direct access to the actual source of water at the well. Further away there is a kundia (water container) marked for the next caste group in the hierarchy. Further on, there will be another container, which will be used for drinking water for cattle and other animals. It is from*

*this source that the scheduled castes used to take water. Though the situation may have changed slightly, the pattern continues. The very practice of drawing water from the well represents the hierarchies and disparities in our social structure. At times, each caste is allotted a particular time to draw water, with low caste communities inevitably being permitted to draw the water last".<sup>71</sup>*

Mukul Sharma notes Prakash purohit giving a detailed account of caste based wells in several areas of Jodhpur city. Jodhpur, one of the largest cities of Rajasthan, is recognized for its traditional wells, tanks, and water bodies. However, several wells have their well-defined caste identity, created and owned by a particular caste group and at times used exclusively by them. To name a few, Kumaharia kuan, Khema ka kuan, Tapariyo ka kuan, Bhatiyo ka kuan, Darziyo ka kuan, Shivram ka bera, Bhati bera, Mia ka bera, Maliko ka bera, and mali kua are wells <sup>72</sup>.

In a monumental study, combined with intimate local knowledge, David Mosse has highlighted how village tanks and the irrigation systems are public institutions that express social relations, caste status, prestige, and honor. Mosse argues: More generally, in Tamil Nadu, rights and shares in tanks are tied to the social privilege and rank of locally dominant kin or caste groups in regionally distinct ways. <sup>73</sup>

Another extensive anthropological research by Esha Shah on tank irrigation technologies and agrarian practices in Karnataka demonstrates how the social order around water distribution is reproduced through reproduction of technological designs<sup>74</sup>.

Caste also came into play in the construction of dams in various time periods. The work required a large labor force, which was not always voluntary. Kathleen Morrison's significant archeological analysis presents a historical memory of the injustice suffered by specialist Vodda 'tank diggers'. Her study area in northern Karnataka also unfolds that almost every reservoir is also associated with an account of sacrifices made, mostly by women and low-caste men, to prevent reservoir breaching or for allaying drought<sup>75</sup>

Well irrigation and use of mechanized pumps in Gujarat, emphasized in the colonial period were found to be anchored in traditional hierarchy and power, characterized by caste and money. Even in the recent period, some fieldwork done by scholars in Kheda district in 1976 revealed that when a small settlement of Vankars, an untouchable group had sunk their own tube well and purchased a pump, they had surplus water which they

had tried to sell to some adjoining Patels who needed water for their fields. Despite their need, the Patels had refused to buy the water, considering it to be 'polluted'<sup>76</sup>.

Ezhil Elangovan, a Dalit intellectual, has documented the history of the Arundathiyar, one of the largest Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu. He traces the thirty-four-year reign of Thirumalai Nayakkar over the Madurai Empire between 1625 and 1659, and shows how during that time dams, bridges, temples, and great palaces were constructed and human sacrifice was made to ensure the safety and strength of the construction works<sup>77</sup>.

The Dalit social scientist Sanal Mohan, in his new work on slavery in Kerala, traces the collective memories of Dalit Pulaya and Paraya laborer through their songs and stories, which narrate the harsh labor involved in the reclamation of backwaters in colonial Travancore. Archival evidence of speeches of Dalit representatives in the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha (Travancore Popular Assembly) also provides detailed accounts of the suffering of these laborers in relation to their work in the backwaters, flood barriers, and embankments<sup>78</sup>.

Through an insightful study of stories, songs, and legends around pre-modern pasts of tanks in Karnataka, Esha Shah offers us an alternative history of water tanks. Remembered and narrated by Voddas and Dalit women, almost every tank in the semi-arid region of south Karnataka had a story or a sacrifice song attached to it. The labor for tank construction came primarily from the Vodda caste, and their narratives suggested different forms of coercive labor. These legends repeatedly chronicle Voddas' grievances about not being paid, or being paid inadequately, or only in kind. A genre of traditional ballad recounts stories of women about to be sacrificed in a tank for hydrological irregularities, that is, either not receiving any water or faced with the threat of floods. Some of the songs also worship or deify the sacrificed woman. There is a popularly remembered story about the sacrifice of a lower-caste man to prevent the breach of an embankment during a time of heavy rain. In certain parts of the mixed zone (Kollar and Bellary districts), almost every tank has a story attached to it of a sacrifice made to alleviate drought, to save the tank from breaching, or to prevent the embankment from giving way.<sup>79</sup>

The coupling of water with caste and Dalits encompasses complex trajectories of exclusion, untouchability, pollution, force, and punishment. Gopal Guru considers water a critical element in the archaeology of untouchability: water determines the scale of

untouchability. Water, in fact, forms the lifeline or provides the most important precondition for the survival of untouchability<sup>80</sup>.

However, Dalit suffering and exclusion around water exemplifies only one half of an ecological panorama. Alongside, water experiences of Dalits also lay the foundations for their own eco-initiatives on water. In some cases, through their struggles and interventions in water, Dalits have coined their own idioms and vibrant cultural symbols outside the bonds of oppression and stigmatization. The following section takes up two such case studies from Bihar, where Dalits have used water to represent their own ecological vision in a collective manner, drawing from a rich repertoire of their religious-cultural and social resources.

For their part, Dalits have attempted to assert their everyday reliance on water and challenged not only the control of upper castes, but also articulated Dalit water activities as inherently non-elite and non-exclusionary.

For the past thirty years particularly, Dalit assertions on water have accelerated. With increasing competition over water, however, the powerful have evolved new ways to deny Dalits access to it. Atrocities on Dalits and agitations around water gained prominence since the late 1980s, at times gaining national importance. Several examples of upper caste atrocities against Dalits and Dalit retaliations against upper castes in Bihar, Rajasthan and Maharashtra were documented by Ghanshyam Shah, Praful Bidwai, Suhas Paranjape, and others<sup>81</sup>.

As Dalit protests over water bodies began to emerge in a big way, Dalit organizations too began raising the issue of water as an ecological—caste issue in a more frequent and systematic manner. For example, in 2003, at the Asia Social Forum, the LSS organized a workshop on the issue, where Dalit rights activist Deepak Bharti presented a paper discussing Dalit rights over ponds in Bihar<sup>82</sup>.

In 2012 the National Confederation of Dalit Organizations (NACDOR), in association with Water Aid, organized a consultation and conference on the subject and created a platform to raise Dalit issues in water, sanitation, and hygiene<sup>83</sup>.

Alongside, in subtle ways, Dalits have made departures from traditional water management systems. For example, Dalits in Uttarakhand stated that they preferred piped water schemes that ensure dignity in access and use of water, rather than collecting water

traditionally from a dhara—a natural stream, often involved in Hindu religious rites and rituals. In villages of Garhwal, with mixed populations of Dalits and higher castes, Dalits have been subject to severe sanctions and restrictions regarding their access to water. Dalit must wait their turn to get water until after all upper caste households have finished collecting it from the dharas. In many cases, villages maintain two separate caste specific dharas <sup>84</sup>.

#### **4.1.9 Dalit Cultural Politics of Water**

In claiming their right over water, Dalits and their organizations have creatively deployed their myths and cultural symbols to construct their ecological heroes, which have inspired them in their water struggles. One such unique environmental struggle in the late 1980s was of laborers and peasants in Balawadi and Tandulwadi villages of Khanapur taluka in the Sangli district of Maharashtra. It was over the right of Dalits to sell a portion of the sand from the dried up Verala River in order to build a small dam to irrigate their land, which was remarkably named 'Bali Raja Bandhara'. Though not exclusively a Dalit movement, in this case, the naming of the dam after King Bali by Mukti Sangharsh, the organization that spearheaded the movement, invoked the cultural and caste myths and memories of the region <sup>85</sup>.

There are several examples, where Dalits deploy mythical figures and ancestors in their water struggle so as to enhance their ecological entitlements. In the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, some Dalits were severely beaten up for drawing water from a hand pump in the Murtigaon village of Jalna district. As a mark of protest, Dalits installed a 12-foot high brick and granite statue symbolizing a sun and a torch of their traditional fighter, Veer <sup>86</sup>.

#### **4.1.10 Water as an Institution, social and cultural system: GMA and LSS**

In the two case studies<sup>87</sup> that I present here, cultural symbols and myths derived from the water fields are ingeniously assembled by Dalits as a community toolbox to demand fishing rights, and to attach themselves to pasts, places, and resources, and to provide critiques of caste practices and dominant Hindu mythologies.

Madhubani (once known as Mithila) is dotted with numerous ponds and are interconnected amongst themselves and also with the river, resulting in smooth recharging through flood water. Several rivers flow through it like kamala, Kareh, Balan, Bhutahi Balan, Gehuan, Supan, trishula, Jeevachh, Koshi, and Adhwara. The district was

one of the principal fish producing centers in Bihar. The region comprises of 13.08% of population of scheduled castes, among which Musahars are the largest, followed by Chamars, Mallahs, Dhobis, Pasis, Kanjars, Bantars, Chaupals, Doms, Turis, and Dhangads.

It has a long history of land and caste conflicts. Musahars have long since been credited with being able to dig deeper and faster and for the possession of the skill of measuring and assessing the quality of soil. However, the disappearing demand for their work, resulted in (A) large scale migration of young male members during most of the agro-season since early 1990s. (B) increased the visibility of Dalit women in public spaces. (C) made money lenders more exploitative – refusing to pay wages for agricultural laborers and attacking, suppressing, and killing Dalits against their possession of Government, surplus or bhoodani lands. (D) Increased the visibility of the Musahars' own symbols and idioms in the socio-cultural landscape of the region.

During 1990s in Mithila region, Dalits were at the center of the conflict over the issue of ownership and rights of fishing in government, and traditional ponds, rivulets and water-logged areas. Mallahs and musahars fought hard to claim their rights over them against caste landlords and money lenders. Despite Bihar government's and the Madhubani district administration's rules and regulations stating that Mallahs and their fisherman co-operative societies or Dalits' villages near these water bodies own these water bodies, they were exploited and accumulated by the rich and the powerful, mostly forward castes, in multiple ways. These water bodies were officially being leased out to a Mallah or Musahr through fishermen's co-operative societies, with the revenue being fixed by the government, only to run the show through a powerful and corrupt nexus with landowner or money lender and make the poor, illiterate, landless, and indebted mallahs to a mere water workers and wage laborers.

Lok shakti sangathan (LSS) started questioning and confronting the situation, and many Dalit villages and Tolas began to assert their rights, and celebrate their victories by hoisting the flags of Deena-Bhadri symbols. Few incidents marking their victories are (1) 1993, Madhubani Mahila Matsyapalak sangathan, in organization of fisher women in Riyam village liberated a pond. (2) In 1994-5, Sirpur musahari owned the Sirpur pond. (3) In 2000, Dalit women of Haithwadi village formed their own society and liberated 31

ponds 4 since March 2010, Soharai village controlled the Tiwari pond (renamed as Deena-Bhadri pond).

However, the continuing contestation for the ownership and use of over 100 ponds in Jhanjharpur Block, tells us that there is not only a need of land reforms but also for some urgent water reforms.

All the villages of Mallahs and Mushars that Mukul Sharma visited complained that the administration had not supported their struggles even after the liberation of water bodies most of them were still not being leased out to Dalits, only to let the control of land owners and money lenders continue.

Thus, reflected in their struggles for restoration of water bodies, Madhubani region witnessed a cry for justice from Dalits, despite its rich history of water bodies and multiple ways of water harvesting and such a cry is persistent even today.

Stories and narratives of Ponds in Madhubani region are sometimes closely associated with myths and legends of Hindu religion like Ram and Sita. It is said, Environmental initiative like Talab Bachao Abhiyaan for the restoration, reclamation, and conservation of ponds in this region take immense pride in the Rig Veda and in the concerned religious ritual (Yangyan) performances.

However, Dalit and their organizations provide an alternative narrative about the ponds which remained silent in the dominant environmental thought: firstly, they highlight the contrast between the beauty of Mithila landscape and cruelty of caste injustice, which equally affects the ponds. Secondly, the struggle over ownership and use of water, pond, and fish underscores Dalits' continuing emphasis on freedom and justice to achieve a healthy balance and relationship with nature. Thirdly, unjust water systems, they reason debar Dalits from natural waterscapes and destroy the water resource itself. Fourthly, they create disincentives where Dalits don't feel a sense of being and belonging with ponds, which prevents them from establishing secure and creative relationships with water. Fifthly, diverging from a grand narrative of the past, Dalits' highlight how dominant laws, socio-economic systems and property structures, undermine their independent environmental agencies. Lastly, Dalits' struggle around water and ponds also try to be established new regimes of property rights, individual rights and collective agencies.



Thus, offering a new basis for their cultural politics of water, Dalits argue that through creative and free interaction with water (by having rights over ponds and fishing), they will not only be able to resist caste oppression, but also evolve a Dalit sense of self.

With 10.49% of SCs and STs, and situated in the southeast part of Bihar in the Ganga basin, Bhagalpur is one of the oldest districts of the state. Among Dalits, Chamras form the biggest segment. Other Dalit castes in the region are Musahar, Dhobis, Pasi, Hari, Dom, Dhangad, Ghari, Khuriar, and Turi. The Ganga river flows through the district and it has vast tracts of Diara land—the plain between Ganga and its tributaries. Floods and displacements are common phenomena of this region and fishing has been a dominant source of livelihood in this region.

In the 1990s and 2000, the area had several conflicts and struggles over fishing and water rights. A powerful movement to free Ganga Ghats, which were under the control of Ex-zamindars, landlords and criminal gangs, emerged in the region. It was led by boatmen, farmers, and fisherfolk. The movement was subjected to brutal suppression, boatmen and fisherfolk were beaten up and killed, activists captured, and dogs set on them. Boats were attacked and sunk.<sup>88</sup>

Here Kagzi Tola, a basti exclusively of fishermen belonging to the Nishad caste, became the nerve center of the much-celebrated environmental movement of fishermen in the 1980s and 1990s.

Ganga Mukti Andolan, (GMA) started on 22 February, 1982, a movement to liberate Ganga, demanded the abolition of the Jalkar Zamindari, which is spread over 80 kms, that is from Sultanganj to Pirpainti<sup>89</sup>, and had continued even after the abolition of Zamindari system in the 1950s.

GMA, in its decades of struggle organized several local and state-wide actions—marches, dharnas, jamghat (gathering), Jutaa (to amass), naukajuloos (boat demonstration), and shobha yatra (colorful processions) in which fishermen, boatmen, peasants, laborers, writers, intellectuals came together under the banner of (Jal Shramik Sammelan) and Nishad Jal Shramik Sangh. In the course of the movement, the image and history of Ekalavya slowly emerged, emphasizing on its democratic nature and conversely displaying that many other mainstream environmental movements had a monoculture legacy that did not often represent Dalit heroes and icons, and became an important

symbol for Dalits to express their inextricable rooting in their own cultural world, and sustained Dalits' environmental movement through difficult circumstances.

Tufani Baba, Baba Amar Singh, and Kalu Dheewar too were commemorated during GMA'S movement, defining Dalits' affinity to their ecological ancestors. These icons straddle overlapping themes of their movement like protest against casteism, injustice and violence, and celebration of nature, knowledge, and local religious value

Thus, Dalit narratives democratize water and show that any definition of community is internally split simultaneously. In the process, Dalits' agentive role is exposed through their articulation of rights for the society as a whole. For instance, different meaning is acquired by Ganga *mai* (mother) in the Dalit water world and struggles, briefed in a slogan coined by GMA in Kehalgaon: *Ganga ko Ganga rehne do! Ganga ko aviral behne do !!(let Ganga remain Ganga! Let Ganga flow free!!)*

This by being at the heart of GMA, carried layers of meanings as it not only calls for a Ganga, free from private control and industrial pollutants, but also for free-flowing, caste- free water which is bound by stigmatization and dogmas of caste purity and pollution. It is this insight and ethos that lie at the heart of a Dalit egalitarian water-ecological vision.

## Chapter V

### 5.1 Conclusion

It has been a usual question among scholars and environmental studies as to why Dalits are aloof from environmentalism, despite its closeness to many Dalit lives. This research has attempted to summarise the interface between Dalits and environment through individuals, regions, case studies, and symbols. My work has led me to conclude that the interlocking between nature and caste, and ecology and Dalits, are vibrant and dynamic, offering much in academic research in the domain of both Dalit and environmental studies. Studying the interface between them can enhance the scope of both the arenas providing new visions and insights.

The focus of conventional scholarship on environment in India has been on a perceived glorious past, tradition, community, culture, religion, colonialism, conflict, and conservation. However, such narratives have often missed Dalit voices. Though emphasis on our past is important for environment studies, we need to move beyond that. The new environmental questions that are generated need to respond to a 'new' environmentalism, specifically in the context of caste and Dalits. Mainstream environmentalism has built its bedrock of its ecological politics on being loyal to caste and Hindu ontology. It is not likely that their concerns will be altered altogether. But, the new generation with its environmental activism and writings has started paying more emphasis on those people living on the margins of their existence with their conflicting positions. However, the analysis in this research has shown that the arguments and actions propounded by Dalits and anti-caste activists have not been paid serious interrogation overlapping with ecological theories and politics in India.

This research has attempted to critique eco-Brahminism of modern India reflected in some mainstream environmental thought. More significantly, it has tried to bring to light Dalit conceptions of caste access to nature through Dalit thought, writings, leaders, histories, memories, myths, symbols, and activism. Important theoretical foundations towards Dalit environmentalism can be provided by Caste and Dalit thought on environment while also raising new questions, concepts, and arguments for Indian ecological history as a whole. We possess a rich repository of environmental

experiences, knowledge, and culture of Dalits. The emphasis of Dalit environmentalism, according to this research, is the notion of new commons with spatial equity, new life, new community and compassionate democracy. Further, there are enough grounds to argue that Dalit culture has molded itself along with other cultures that are prevalent, while transforming each other positively. Dalit—upper caste encounters in the natural realm have been antagonistic, yet there could be few internal commonalities, dissolving the differences while simultaneously complementing each other at complex levels. Thus, we have a new environmental approach through a synthesis of various trends: it coincides in and grows out of traditions. It is defined by D.R. Nagaraj as 'ontological difference', which meant, accepting and examining the difference that leads to the truth of dynamic unity. Thus, he stated in a context, “The Gandhian merger of the Harijan cause with the regeneration of the entire village has a great deal of relevance, but this enthusiasm has to be slightly altered from the Dalit perspective.... The Gandhian endorsement of village India has to be whetted by Ambedkarite skepticism”<sup>1</sup>. I also attempted to show the environmental facets of Dalit histories and politics in spite of inadequate attention being paid to Dalit historiographies. Ambedkar's Mahad struggle with its aim of freeing water and reclaiming the tank conveys us, that rather than comprehending conventional environmentalism in environmental movements, our focus should be on Dalit political and social traditions to position their streams of environmentalism. Some of the enduring themes of ecological and social justice like Dalit access, ownership, rights, and participation in natural resources, of late, have begun to appear in the eco-scene. Dalit living tradition questions caste domination and discrimination in environment while simultaneously linking with social justice. The need of the hour is to understand that Caste is an injustice to both Dalit and nature as it subjugates humans and resources.

Will there be any environmental legacy of Dalits and anti-caste intellectuals? Will Dashrath Manjhi, Ambedkar and Mayavel be remembered as environmental figures? Will caste be served as a catalyst to rejuvenate energies and commitments for future objectives of environmental movements? My research does not intend to decipher the picture puzzle fully and hopes that future research will build on these questions.

Concern for nature is being filtered into politics, economy, and society at the conscientious and at the praxis levels. Therefore, Dalits' experience, tradition, memory, language, and interest in relating humans to the natural world can give a boost to environmental politics while simultaneously creating common grounds that can facilitate innovation and exchange between an established stream and its vocal opponents.

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### Chapter II

#### **Eco-Brahminisim: The Caste and Nature Interface.**

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