



## **Purity and Pollution: Social Injustice in Sivakami's *The Grip of Change***

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### **Abstract**

Dr. Ambedkar defined caste as endogamy. Indian society is essentially a conglomeration of variegated endogamic groups, which are one above another in hierarchical order. Each endogamic/caste group's order in the hierarchy is governed by that caste group's level of purity/pollution, which is presumed to be associated with their birth. With the increase in the level of purity, social status and other allied privileges increase, proportionately and with the increase in the level of pollution, social stigma and other allied injustices increase, proportionately. P. Sivakami IAS, a disillusioned civil services officer, annihilates the myths about India and Indian culture, in her realistic fiction, *The Grip of Change*.

### **Keywords**

P. Sivakami; *The Grip of Change*; Purity and Pollution; Dalit Fiction; Dalit Novel.



One of the most controversial topic regarding Indian society and culture is its rigid caste system, which divides its people based on their birth into water-tight compartments, restricting mobility. The word 'caste' is taken from the

Portuguese word *casta*. It can be defined as a rigid social system in which a social hierarchy is maintained down the line generation after generation.

According to Hindu texts, hierarchy amongst castes are a part of the ordained natural order and it is explained or justified in terms of purity and pollution. High-caste status is associated with purity and low-caste status, with pollution. Those born into high-ranking castes would have inborn purity, like the *Brahmans*, *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas* (*Dvija* or twice-born classes) and similarly, the Dalits are inherently polluted. *Shudras* are comparably purer than the Dalits. Dalits can easily pollute a person from the purified classes just by physical contact and the latter will have to perform ritual cleanliness like bathing in flowing water and changing clothes. This explains for the distance the upper and lower castes maintain in terms of inter-caste relationships.

Based on the concept of purity and pollution, every Hindu village is visibly divided into village and ghetto. Dr. Ambedkar explains it as follows: “Every Hindu village has a ghetto. The Hindu lives in the village and the untouchables in the ghetto (Ambedkar Thought 22)”. The caste Hindus or *savarna* Hindus i.e., Hindus belonging to any one of the four *varnas* live inside the village, whereas the Dalits live outside the village in separate quarters.

Sivakami in her debut novel in English, The Grip of Change, pictures vividly how a Hindu village is, how the people of different castes interact with each other and how hard the lives of Dalits are in Indian villages. The action of the novel is set in a village called Puliur, which has derived its name from the abundant tamarind trees surrounding it. In the month of *chittirai*, the flat, sour fruits, delicate shelled were always plentiful. In Puliur, the village and *cheeri* (Dalit colony) were almost joined, yet a few tamarind trees in between them that kept apart. The Dalit communities are confined to the *cheeri*, located at the margins of the village. The village or *grammam* is that part where the caste Hindus live. The term village in the Tamil context denotes both the exclusive habitation of the caste Hindus and the combined settlements of all castes-touchable and untouchable.

Like all Indian villages, Puliur has caste streets for every caste. The Dalits should not enter the caste Hindu streets and they should restrict themselves to the use of the facilities inside the *cheeri* itself. The caste Hindus will not enter the *cheeri* at any cost. Even when the higher officials want to meet the *cheeri* people they will stop near the tamarind trees that connect the village with the *cheeri* and the Dalits should come out of the *cheeri* to meet them. When the huts of Dalits were burnt in *cheeri*, a young collector came to visit the people to provide food, clothes and provisions. He asks the *Tahsildar* whether he can distribute the provisions inside the *cheeri*. But the *Tahsildar* advises him, “if you step inside the *Cheeri* you will be surrounded by pigs (Sivakami 76)”. Then he asks whether he can distribute the provisions in the school. Again he replies that only goats and stray dogs sleep on the school verandah. So the Sub-collector finally concedes to stay back in the shade of the tamarind tree suggested by the *Tahsildar*. The Tamarind tree is the meeting place of the caste Hindus and Dalits. The caste Hindus have an aversion towards *cheeri* as they feel that they would be polluted just by entering into the *cheeri*.

Thangam defies the caste restrictions by entering into the upper caste street to reach open toilet ground quickly out of physical emergency to relieve herself. Kamalam, Udayar’s wife interrupted her on her way as she felt insulted by her violation.

‘Udayar’s wife Kamalam glared at me scornfully, and shouted, “You Paraya bitch, How dare you walk on this street? Is this not the upper caste street? Go away from here.” ... I replied to Kamalam, ‘Amma, this road is laid by the government and you can’t order away.” Kamalam reacted like a wild animal when I answered her... and picked up a thick stick and began to beat me ... her brothers Subbu Udayar, Manicka Udayar and Mayilvahana Udayar and the said Kamalam’s brother-in-law Perumal Udayar - all four pulled me by my hair, tore my blouse, beat my breasts, dragged me along the street naked and tried to murder me... (Sivakami 11, 12)

The police came to the outskirts of the *cheeri* to investigate Thangam's case. When they question Pichappillai the patriarch of the *cheeri*, he started narrating the incident that had transpired. He said that Thangam had stomach-ache the day before and she went to the open toilet ground. Even the police interrupted him "why did she have to go through the upper caste street (Sivakami 29)", for which he replied that earlier they used the ground adjacent to the *Paraya* school to defecate but due to the construction of the said school, they had to go use the village open toilet ground. Again the police interrupted Pichappillai by asking how he could call the general government school as *Paraya* school for which he replied,

That's the panchayat union school, meant for everyone. It has become a *Parayar* school, filled only with our children. The upper castes don't send their children there, because our children go to that school. They call the school the *Parayar* school. Even the teachers call it by that name.' (Sivakami 29)

The Police, the law enforcers of the land are not bothered by the oppressive system against the Dalits. The teachers, who should have educated the students about equality, too are not bothered about the inhuman treatment meted out by the Dalits.

The Sub-collector of Athur and *Tahsildar* has arrived with Police Inspector to the village to estimate the values of properties lost in fire. But they never set foot in the *cheeri* to estimate the loss incurred. Instead the people huddled near the tamarind tree located between *cheeri* and village. Caste Hindus were seated in chairs and benches, whereas Dalits stood about forty feet away from them. Few elders of Dalit community sat on the roots of the tamarind tree. Such things happen all over India and they are done so as to preserve purity. It is quite pathetic to note that a Sub-Collector (an IAS officer) and a *Tahsildar* (a Group - I officer) are not even bothered by the prevalence of disparities.

Thangam works for Udayar and she does all the odd jobs at his home and farm. She channelizes the water from the bore-well to the plant beds, day and

night. She takes a good care of his farm and his house. Udayar is physically attracted towards Thangam, who is a widow. Knowing that she is a destitute, without any kinsmen, Udayar started to exploit her sexually. Thangam falls prey to his lust. Kaliyan, a Dalit youth, who worked for Ramalinga Reddiyar, too was sexually exploited by the Reddiyar's wife. He was an extremely skilled worker. He will built haystacks, and wove thatch, dug the water channels, look after cows and cattles and at same time equally skilled in pleasuring Shantha, Ramalinga Reddiyar's wife. She was attracted by his beauty and youth. If he did not satisfy Shantha's lust she will yell at him and show her severity throughout the day. Both the Dalits from *cheeri* have been used by the owners to satisfy their carnal desires. But during sexual encounters none of the caste Hindus minded the pollution. Caste Hindus, who are conscious of maintaining their purity are not bothered about it when sex is concerned.

Naicker owns a jewellery shop, which is opposite to the police station. When Kathamuthu comes to the police station for petty cases, he will pay a visit to the Naicker. Naicker always enjoys Kathamuthu's company, but when Kathamuthu leaves the place he comments, "poor fellow, he belongs to a lower caste (Sivakami 18)". Once, a relative of Kathamuthu went to buy a silver *araignam* (waist chain) for his new born baby at the Naicker shop. Naicker in order to avoid polluting himself by touching the Dalit, dropped the silver pieces in his palm from a distance. When Kathamuthu came to know of the matter he got angry and shouted at Naicker. Naicker convinced him by telling him that "I never pay attention to caste, I am not a Brahmin preserving the old order ... All that I am particular is cleanliness (Sivakami, 18)". Naicker's reply aggravates Kathamuthu's anger. He asks "Oho, so there is another meaning for untouchability (Sivakami 18)".

Caste Hindus are very much particular about conserving their purity and fending off pollution. In order to shield themselves from pollution the caste Hindus would not enter into *cheeri*, would not allow Dalits to enter into their street, would not send their children to the schools in which Dalits study, would maintain a safe distance from the Dalits and would never ever touch the Dalits.

But when it comes to sexual exploitation, the concept of purity and pollution vanishes from the minds of the caste Hindus.

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