



The Pain of Downtrodden in Reference to *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* by Omprakash Valmiki

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Abstract

Caste discrimination is common among the Dalits in India. The Indian English writers address the issue from the nationalist and progressive point of view of the marginalised sections of Indian society. Dalit literature questions the mainstream literary theories and upper-caste ideologies and explores the neglected aspects of life and angst against age-old oppression. The Dalit writers, contrarily, narrate the discrimination authentically. This paper aims to analyse various forms of social injustices like denying-wage, accession-denial, caste-tracing, abuse of power, and the consequent challenges in author's life as portrayed in the autobiography *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki. *Joothan* is a memoir of growing up 'untouchable' in the 1950s outside a typical village in Uttar Pradesh. Omprakash Valmiki highlights the rigidity of the caste in India that has resulted in the socio-economic oppression of thousands across India over centuries merely because of the 'lesser caste' to which they belong. This topical theme lights on a content analysis of Dalit writings to acquaint the reader with some dominant and non-dominant concepts recurring in them.

Keywords: Marginalised, Untouchable, Discrimination, Oppression.

Why is my caste my only identity?

-Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*

India is one of the fastest-growing countries in the world, yet it is notorious for its rigid caste system. During the struggle of Indian independence, two different approaches emerged for improving the people now known as Dalits. The first was led by Mahatma Gandhi, who believed in raising the status of Dalit

people while retaining elements of the traditional caste system but removing the degrading stigma and manifestation of untouchability. The other approach was led by Dr. Ambedkar, a lawyer and himself as untouchable who believed that only by destroying the caste system could untouchability be destroyed.

The term "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit root, which means to crack open, split, crush, grind and so forth. Dalit literature is written by Dalits, on Dalits and for Dalits. The term Dalit means broken or downtrodden. Dalit literature is not only literature of pain but also literature of change and this change can be brought only through education. Traditionally, in the Hindu social order, Dalit were placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, considered Ati-shudras or Avarna and are treated as untouchables. Dalits are a mixed population of numerous castes and in Hindu society, Dalit state has been historically associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure such as leather work, butchering or removal of rubbish, animal carcass and human waste. Unfortunately, even after independence, discrimination against Dalit still exists in rural areas in routine matters such as access to eating places, schools, temples and waste sources, though it has largely disappeared in urban areas and public spheres. Bishop A.C Lal considers "the word Dalit as a beautiful word because it transcends narrow national and sectarian frontier" (Lal, xiii). Arjun Dangle, a Dalit writer does not consider Dalit as a caste but rather 'a realization' which "is related to the experiences, joys, sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society" (Dangle, 264). His collection of short stories was also the depiction of the miseries, frustrations and struggles of the downtrodden.

Om Prakash Valmiki was an Indian Dalit writer and poet. He was born on June 30, 1950 in the village of Barla of Muzaffar nagar district in Uttar Pradesh. He is an Indian dalit writer and poet. *Joothan* is well famous autobiographical novel, which detailed Valmiki's struggles in his life. He belongs to the 'Chuhra' caste, one of the very lowest of Dalit community. So, he has faced lot of abuses and tortures everywhere. The support and encouragement from his family enabled him to face the dangers of being a Dalit. He writes.

We need an ongoing struggle, and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change the rigidly and narrow-mindedness of castes India, which is as relevant today as it was in the early part of the last century (*Joothan* 15).

After retirement from Government Ordnance Factory, he lived in Dehradun where he died of stomach cancer on November 17, 2013.

Joothan: A Dalit's Life by Omprakash Valmiki is the work of Dalit literature first published in Hindi in 1997, it is an autobiography that reveals the painful life of Chuhras, the downtrodden community from North India. Later, it was translated into English in the year 2003 by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, a professor of English at York University. Valmiki published three collections of poetry *Sadiyon Ka Santaap* (1989) *Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka* (1997), and *Ab Aur Nahin* (2009) and two collections of short stories *Salaam* (2000) and *Ghuspethiye* (2004). He also wrote *Dalit Saahity Ka Saundaryshastr* (2001), and a history of the Valmiki community, *Safai Devata* (2009).

In his preface, Omprakash Valmiki says that the title of the autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, was suggested by one of his friends Rajendra Yadavji. The Hindi word, "Joothan" (*Joothan* xxxi) means food left on an eater's plate, usually destined for the garbage pail in a middle-class, urban home. Indian untouchables were been forced to accept and eat joothan for years, although untouchability has been abolished in 1949. The title reveals the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki's community, which had to rely on Joothan and relish it. The writer says: "What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just Joothan" (*Joothan* 10).

Joothan is filled with such incidents, each one of which left a deep scar in the Valmiki's mind. The work reveals the toils and turmoil of the author's life as a member of the untouchable Chuhra community, how he lives in a village near Muzaffar nagar in Uttar Pradesh. Omprakash Valmiki grew up in a region in northern India. He belongs to a untouchable caste named Chuhra (sweepers and cleaners). Chuhra is a community of dalit and the upper-class people have a though that they have a control over the people of Chuhra. Traditionally working as unpaid labourers in the fields, they were tortured and exploited by the powerful tags. Poverty, starvation, and death were their constant companions in the daily struggle for survival. The lack of basic civic amenities and poor sanitation facilities were the curse of that dwelling place. Even education was refused for them. They were not given any proper education, and the government school did not allow the Dalit children to be enrolled. The Savarna system of keeping the lower caste people out of the sphere of education did not change even after independence. Valmiki's childhood was spent here and it had a formative influence on his character which shows their way of living. The Chuhras worked for the tagas, an upper-class people who ill-treated the Chuhras in several ways, Untouchability was one social evil that he faced as he grew up. He says: "Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human" (*Joothan* 2).

The upper-caste tyagis who felt that they had absolute power over them and their labour. If the Dalits dared to refuse unpaid labor, severe retribution would follow. Valmiki narrates one such incident that happened to Chuhra that a government employee came to the Bhangi basti (settlement). They needed some people for clean-up work, for which they werenot ready to pay. As always, it would be

unpaid labour. For days with hunger and thirst people worked to clean the kothi a big house. In return they were sworn. When they refused this unpaid work, they were severely punished. Fifteen days after their refusal, two policemen came and arrested whoever they could lay their hands on and took them to the office of the village panchayat where they were made to squat in a rooster position and beaten mercilessly. "The women and children of the basti were standing in the lane and crying loudly.... They could not think of what else they could do but cry" (*Joothan* 45). The writer reflects, "Why is it a crime to ask to be paid for one's labor? Those who keep singing the glories of democracy use the government machinery to quell the blood flowing in our veins" (*Joothan* 46). In another incident, the boy Valmiki himself was forcibly dragged to work by Fauza Singh Tyagi in the field while he was preparing to appear in the math exam, as though he was a bonded labourer made him totally depressed.

Once it so happened with his mother during Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's daughter marriage. His mother used to clean their place. She was asked to do all sorts of work at Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's home ten to twelve days before the wedding. On the day of wedding Valmiki's mother and his younger sister Maya was sitting outside their house with her basket waiting to get a share of the leftover sweets and the gourmet dishes. When all the people had left after the feast, his mother asked Sukhdev Singh Tyagi to put something on the pattal leaf plate for her children. But Sukhdev Singh pointed at the basket full of dirty pattals and said, "You are taking a basket full of joothan. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going" (*Joothan* 34). Those words of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi penetrated Valmiki's breast like a knife. That night the Mother Goddess Durga entered on his mother's eyes. It was the first time he saw his mother get so angry. She emptied the basket right there. She said to Sukhdev Singh, "Pick it up and put it

inside your house. Feed it to the baratis bridegroom's guests tomorrow morning" (Joothan 34). She gathered Valmiki and his sister and left like an arrow. Sukhdev Singh, pounced on her to hit her, but his mother had confronted him like a lioness without being afraid.

He also faced hardships in the educational institutions. He was bright and he always stood first in class. Reading and writing made the writer an enlightened being. He was selected as the class leader after the examination and his seat was moved from the back of the class to the front. But, the upper-caste boys used to tease the writer in every possible way. They used to laugh at his clothes, which were nothing but rags. Even the teachers and the headmaster were not different in this respect. He was also being humiliated by his teacher. The teachers were dividing the students by their caste and humiliating the low caste people. The teachers made the Chuhras sit on the floor while the other sit on the benches and they were allowed sit beside Tyagi boys. Even he was not allowed to participate in the extracurricular activities. The chuhras were always entrusted with the task of sweeping the homes and public places. It was considered as their duty. Hence the headmaster of the school asked the writer to sweep the school. The Dalit people felt that it was a waste of time to get their children educated. According to them, "What is the point of sending him to school? When has a crow become a swan?" (Joothan 6). He talks about the discrimination they had to face in the school at different points in his autobiography. He says: "During the examinations we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up, lest our hands touch the glass" (Joothan 16).

The social problems faced by the chuhra's haunted Valmiki's mind from his childhood to his adulthood. As a child, he always wished to go to school in neat ironed clothes. But the dhobi refused to wash clothes for a low caste chuhra boy. He realized that one

can somehow get rid of poverty and deprivation but it is not possible to get past caste. While talking about his memories in school, there are some teachers who encouraged him and also some who ill-treated him. Valmiki repeatedly narrates his experiences of pain and exclusion due to the continued practice of untouchability. One day Valmiki was invited to go to a teacher's house to take some grain. There, his friend and Valmiki were welcomed with open arm. The elders of the house offered them meal. As soon as they finished their meal, they were asked a question which revealed their identity and then they were tied with rope to the tree. The people of the upper caste behaved with them so wildly as if they have raped an upper-class girl.

Once when his teacher was narrating a story of Drona's poverty where his son Ashatthama got the flour dissolved in the water, instead of milk. The story has been written in an epic named Mahabharata by Vyasa. Valmiki was listening very attentively the story of Drona, and raised a doubt to teacher,

Master Saheb, if Ashwatthama was given flour mixed in water instead of milk, but what about us who had to drink mar? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't any epic poet ever write a word on our lives? (Joothan 40).

Master saheb became furious when he listened the questions Valmiki the whole class stared at him. As though he had raised a meaningless point. The teacher ordered him to stand in the murga or rooster pose, and pulled down his head to grasp the ear, it was a painful constricted position. Instead of carrying on with the lesson he was going on and on about him being chuhra. He ordered a boy to get a long teak stick. And said, "Chuhre ke, you dare compare yourself with dronacharya... Here, take this, I will write an epic on your body" (Joothan 42). He had rapidly created an epic on Valmiki's back with these wishes of his stick. That epic is still inscribed on his back. Reminding him of

those hated days of hunger and hopelessness, this epic composed out of a feudalistic mentality was inscribed not just on his back but on each nerve of his brain.

Valmiki expresses his mental anguish and emotional terror on quiet a number of occasions. Once When he reached the tenth standard, he was determined to study well in order to get good marks which would fetch him an opportunity to study in a college. But on the eve of his mathematics examination he was made to do forced manual labour. He spent one whole day sowing cane under the instructions of a tyagi. He felt humiliated and tortured. He says: "My mind was set aflame by his swearing. A fire had engulfed my inwards that day. The memories of these crimes of the Tyagis continue to smoulder deep inside me, emitting red hot heat" (Joothan 57).

The writer narrates the tragic circumstances under which they wrote the board exams. There was no electricity and hence they depended on lanterns and oil lamps. His neighbours also were not that supportive as they all also wanted him to do the same types of job entrusted to the Chuhras. In spite of all the hardships, Valmiki passed the high school examination with good marks. He was very happy to see his name in the newspaper. It was the first time that someone from the Chuhra community passed the examination. It was indeed a time for celebration in the whole basti. The writer specially mentions the name of Chamanlal Tyagi, who came to congratulate Valmiki on his hard-earned success. This simple act of kindness from the part of an upper caste tyagi boosted the confidence of the narrator who began to feel that education can bring respect and self-dignity.

After passing the board examination, Valmiki went on to study further. He took science as optional subject. Even there he faced lot of discriminations by the teachers. Valmiki transferred all his anger and frustration to his studies. When he reached class twelve new

problems began to crop up and this time it was in the form of a chemistry teacher named Brajpal. He dashed all his hopes of securing good marks in the examination. This caste minded teacher did not like the idea of an untouchable studying in the school. Hence, he decided to torture the narrator by not allowing him to do lab practicals. The narrator says: "I felt that whenever I went to the lab for practicals, Brajpal would keep me out on some pretext or the other" (Joothan 65). Thus, the writer makes it very clear that education had not altered the degenerated mindset of the people.

His anger and hard work reflects in his examination results also when the results were announced, Valmiki's name featured in the list of failures. He had secured good marks in all other subjects but had failed in the lab test of the chemistry paper. This turn of events put a terrible obstacle in his path of continuing education. According to him "I no longer felt interested in studying. I couldn't make up my mind as to what to do next. I felt surrounded by darkness" (Joothan 66). The narrator's older brother Jasbir was working in Dehradun and he was staying with their mama. He was the one who inspired him to study. He reassured him to leave this village and come to Dehradun to study. He encouraged him that he would pass on the next year.

He joined the DAV College in Dehradun. Things were much better. Though there were occasional conflicts with the members of the Jatava community, Valmiki was not bothered by that, it was during his stay in Dehradun that he got acquainted with Dr. Ambedkar's writings. Dr. Ambedkar's lifelong struggle for eradicating untouchability inspired the narrator. He was extremely grateful to Hemlal, his companion who asked him to read the biography of Ambedkar. Moreover, it was only after reading that book the writer came to realize his misconceptions regarding the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi.

The friendship with Hemlal was the beginning of a new chapter in the writer's life. It was a bond that strengthened the will of the narrator to achieve great things in life. During this period the narrator became an active participant in various activities in the college. In Dehradun protest against the English was in full swing and the writer was plunged into the middle of the action much to the distress of the family members. He was even thrown out of his uncle's house on account of his late working hours in college. Valmiki didn't want to compromise with his studies for a second time. So, he decided to do whatever his uncle ordered. But, his period of distress got lessened when he got a job. He abandoned his college education when he got admitted to the Ordnance Factory as apprentice.

When he informed his father that he had got the job, his father responded positively. He said: "At last you have escaped 'caste'" (Joothan 78). but the writer knows very well that no one can escape the intricate labyrinths of caste created by the upper-class society. As he says: "Caste follows one right up to one's death" (Joothan 78). With a job in hand, Valmiki was happy as it meant a life of self-reliance. After a year's training at the ordnance factory, the writer appeared for a competitive examination and was selected. Hence, he was sent to Jabalpur for further training. Thus, the writer, a poor Dalit boy, was becoming transformed from being an ugly duckling to a swan through his courage and perseverance.

During this period, he got selected to appear for an interview in the Ordnance Factory Training Institute in Bombay for draftsman training. The family's financial situation was miserable at that time but he managed to go to Bombay due to the kind-hearted gesture shown by Mr. Thomas, a senior lecturer in the institute. Though his place changed but the humiliation never failed to follow him.

He talks about a worst experience with a family who became very close to him thinking

that he was a Brahmin. They thought that the surname Valmiki, was certainly a Brahmin surname and hence he was allowed to visit their household and was given certain privileges. Kulkarni's daughter Savita had even fallen in love with Valmiki and later when she realized that he was a Dalit her attitude underwent a sea change. This incident created a deep scar in the mind of the writer who understood that love, respectability, adoration, and privileges were all attained only if the person is born in a high caste. The Dalits are not treated as human beings and this was made clear by the attitude of the Brahmin girl who loved a chaste Hindu and not Valmiki as an individual.

This autobiography is also about the trials and tribulations the writer had to face while fighting for the rights of the Dalits. He also talks about how his surname created a furore in the literary and social circles. While every Dalit wishes to conceal the fact that he is Dalit, Omprakash Valmiki was bold enough to keep it as his surname which was like a slap on the face of upper caste superiority that had engulfed the nation from time immemorial.

Valmiki gives the vivid picture of Dalit life. He points out the fact that caste still remains an indispensable part of their lives. It is a matter of privilege for the upper classes while it is a stigma attached to the Dalits and the other low caste people. It involves a lot of courage and strength to shake off the age-old fetters imposed on these innocent beings. In his own words, Valmiki talks about the demoralizing caste system:

'Caste' is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, 'caste' determines his or her destiny. Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one's control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard-bearers of this country's great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be

born into? Albeit they turn to scriptures to justify their position, the scriptures that establish feudal instead of promoting equality and freedom (*Joothan* 133-134).

As a Dalit, Valmiki paints the problems of Dalits and make aware to the people through his autobiographical novel. His novel is influenced by the great Dalit political leader, B. R. Ambedkar, who also belongs to Dalit community. A document of the long- silence and long-denied sufferings of the Dalits, *Joothan* is a major contribution to the archives of Dalit history and a manifesto for the revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness.

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