



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S JOOTHAN: A RECORD OF PAINFUL EXPERIENCES

MANISHA DEVI

Research Scholar, JNU, Jaipur



MANISHA DEVI

ABSTRACT

Omprakash Valmiki occupies a prominent place among Hindi Dalit writers. The writers who laid the foundation of Dalit literature, he is a forerunner. All his creative work attempts to create an attitude of self-criticism among the Dalits. "*Joothan: A Dalit's life*" written by Omprakash Valmiki is a life narrative of Omprakash Valmiki published in 1997 in Hindi and translated into English in 2003 by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. This autobiography exposes the cruel reality of a Dalit's life by upper caste Hindus. Over the whole country, Dalits constitute about one sixth of India's populations. Omprakash Valmiki belongs to a 'chuhara' caste that is known as 'bhangi' in Uttar Pradesh. A low caste has to face the same humiliations whether he is child or young. The only way to get rid of that situation depends on education and circumstances.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature is the literature about Dalits (untouchables). This literature comes forth in the form of exploitation that is based on class, race, caste or profession. "*Joothan: A Dalit's Life*" is an autobiography of Omprakash Valmiki's life and his experiences being a dalit. Valmiki himself has stated his notion behind writing the autobiography in the preface to the Hindu edition of the book.

According to him, Dalit life is excruciatingly painful charred by experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creation".(vii) Dalits are presented as 'mute' and pathetic characters by upper-caste Indian writers who (Dalits) don't have strength to speak against the oppression meted out to them. The book attempts to highlights Valmiki's effort made for transforming muteness of Dalits.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was the one person who laid the foundation of justice and stressed on equality which is primary requirement of Dalits. As

Baby Kamble notes that after phule and Shahu Maharaj it was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who provided the ideological and intellectual foundations for a sustained critique of the caste system. Dalit literature acquired the form and force of a militant political movement and challenged the very foundations of Hinduism.

Dalit literature consists in many qualities which differentiate it from rest of the literature. It has an authenticity, a sense of social mission, a fiery strength and vigourness. The Dalits are behaved worse than animals by Hindus. They are banned to enter into communities of upper castes. When they ask for their wages they are ill treated and threatened. Physical and mental violence is faced at every step by them. Dalit Literature is the only medium to show their cruelties. As Ashok Boyar states "The Dalit writers have to be a spokesperson of their community. He carries the burden of his society on his shoulders. He is a bard and he can

even be the prophet to lead his people to the Promised Land" (64).

Omprakash Valmiki's, *Joothan* is the best example for Dalit autobiography. This book is an account of Valmiki's journey from his birth in the untouchable family to his present situation as a Dalit writer. Born as 30th June 1950 at Barla District, Muzafarnagar, U.P. to a low Dalit family, he was the only member in his house that had ever gone to school. But at that time, Dalits were not allowed to enter in schools. He remembers today that all his teachers could call by his caste not by name. He was a voracious reader of books. When he was in Maharashtra came in contact with the Dalit movement. In an interview with Suresh Chandra Dwivedi, he accepted his respect towards Dr. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar's life struggle and his ideology prepared the emotional base of Valmiki's poems, short stories and autobiography. (32)

Like other Dalit Autobiographies of Dalit writers Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* demonstrates the self of the community. His life narrative starts with a description of his own village and the place where the people of Dalit community live together. He says that Dalits living places are aside the upper caste dwelling place. He writes "All the quarrels of the village would be discussed in the shape of a Round Table Conference at the same spot. The pigs wondering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights, this was the environment of the childhood". (Valmiki,1). Through education, Valmiki emerges as an enlighten personality from this degraded social position. He asserts that he had never felt ashamed of being a low caste person but he is always concerned about the continuous persecution of his dalit community by upper castes (Tagas):

We did all sorts of work for the Tagas, including cleaning, agricultural work and general labor. We would often have to work without pay. Nobody dared to refuse this unpaid work for which we got neither money nor grain. Instead, we got sworn at and abused. They did not call us by our names. If a person were older, then he would be called 'Oe Chuhre'. If the person

were younger or of the same age, then Abey Chuhre was used. (2)

Valmiki says that the chuhras were not seen as human being but considered low than dogs, cats, cows or buffaloes. They were utilized until the work was done and after that throw them away. Valmiki asserts that teachers do not treat all the students equally. Valmiki's experience suggests that the teachers discriminated Dalits in all walks of life. He reminds us one such incidents that:

Headmaster Bishamabr Singh had been replaced by Kaliram. Along with him had come another new teacher. After the arrival of these two, the three of us fell on terrible times. We would be thrashed at the slightest excuse. Ram singh would escape once in a while, but Sukkhan Singh and I got beaten almost daily. I was very weak and skinny those days. (4)

Omprakash Valmiki tells that one day the Headmaster Kaliram called him and asked: 'Abey, what is your name?' I answered 'Omprakash' 'Chure Ka?' The Headmaster gives me some work to do. He ordered me climb that tree and break some twigs for making a broom. He also said that I should have to sweep the whole school. As it is your family occupation. At the same time, all students of class were studying.

Valmiki writes that his great inspirations were his father and mother. When his father saw him sweeping the school ground he abruptly stopped him. He asks "who is that teacher that progeny of Dronacharya who forces my son to sweep"? Valmiki's father has deep courage and resilience with which he confronted the headmaster that day. He says that "his father had all sorts of weakness, but the decisive turn that he gave my future that day has had a great impact on my personality." (6) Valmiki would interrogate the teachers about their love towards the Hindu epics. In change, he was humiliated with caste remarks by the Hindu teachers:

Once in school, Master Saheb was teaching the lesson on Dronacharya. He told us, almost with tears in his eyes, that Dronacharya had fed flour dissolves in water to his famished son, Ashwatthama, in

lieu of milk. The whole class had responded with great emotion to this story of Dronacharyas's dire poverty. This episode was penned by Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata to highlight Drona's poverty. I had the temerity to stand up and ask Master Saheb a question afterwards. So 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 an epic poet ever write a word on our lives?

Another incident of discrimination revealed by Valmiki is his experience at Tyagi Inter College in Muzaffarnagar. In that college, Phool Singh Tyagi was the physical education teacher who punished the students for silly reasons. Once, a Chuhra by caste (Ram Singh) was punished by him. For simple reason, Tyagi commented Ram Singh, "Abey brother-in-law, progeny of a Chuhra. Let me know when you die. You think you are a hero. Today I am going to draw oil from tresses (47). Although, all school teachers and the Principal also were watching the scene, no one stopped Phool Singh because they were not concerned about the Chuhra boy. The upper caste Tyagis always tried to humiliate Valmiki by calling his caste 'Chuhra'.

Omprakash Valmiki had to face humiliation at Brajpal Singh Tyagi's place. He was a chemistry teacher. One day Brajpal Tyagi asked Bhikuran to go to his village near Devband. At this, Valmiki felt exited to accompany Bhikuram and by bicycle left for the village. They reached the village. They started their journey in the morning and reached the teacher's village. After that, they were called into have lunch. When lunch was ready to be served, Valmiki was much hesitant due to his low caste status. After taking the meal, Bhikuram sat down and Valmiki was standing at a short distance. The elder one, knowing the two boys from Barla, asked them, "what is your caste?" At this Valmiki answered, "We are of the Chuhra caste." (51) After listening their caste the old man lifted a heavy stick and hit Bhikuram on his back. People suggested the old man that these boys should be tied to a rope and hung from the trees. This incident deeply disturbed Valmiki.

Valmiki interaction with Kulkarni's family led to Kulkarni's daughter Savitha falling in love with Valmiki with the thought that he was a Brahmin. But when she learnt the caste of Valmiki, she started to cry. Valmiki writes: She started cry as though my being an SC was a crime. She sobbed for a long time and the distance between us had increased. The hatred of thousands of years had entered our hearts. What a lie culture and civilization are." (98). This caste discrimination led to the permanent separation between Savitha and Valmiki and they never met again.

Valmiki faced discrimination within the family due to his surname. His wife Chanda preferred their gotra name 'Khairwal' instead of Valmiki. Despite being illiterate, Valmiki's father had been pleased when he found out that Valmiki used his last name. But his wife had different mind about using his surname 'Valmiki'. She often said to Valmiki, "If we had a child. I would definitely have made you change your surname. " (126) when he heard such comments do torment me. I become unsettled when I hear them." (126)

Once Valmiki was invited to deliver a lecture on Buddhist Literature and Philosophy at a conference. A member of the audience shouted, "How can a 'Valmiki' be allowed to speak on Buddhist literature and philosophy. Aren't you ashamed?" (131). But Valmiki silenced him with his excellent speech as the pervasive spread of casteism in the Hindu society.

In 1980, when Valmiki was returning to Chandrapur from a trip to Rajasthan, Valmiki and his wife have seats in the Pink city express from Jaipur. There was a prosperous family near them: husband, wife and two small children. They started conversation. The lady asked, " what is your caste?" (133) and before his wife replied, Valmiki answered that they belonged to 'Bangli'. There was no communication between the two families during the rest of the journey. According to Valmiki, "A wall had come up between us as though we had disturbed their enjoyment by encroaching on them through a trap door. The atmosphere had turned oppressive, the journey had become very painful. (133)

Similar to the experiences of discrimination by Limble and Jadav, Valmiki too traces out the genesis of the caste discrimination and its influence on Dalit even among the educated. Valmiki writes that "the pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights. This was the environment of my childhood." (1) The argument of Valmiki is a critique of Gandhian notion of the village and the *Gram Swarajyam*. The Chuhras have to work without pay. He writes:

We did all sorts of work for the Tagas, including cleaning, agricultural work and general labor. We would often have to work without pay. Nobody dared to refuse this unpaid work for which we got neither money nor grain. Instead, we got sworn at and abused. (2)

In villages, the untouchables were forced to do unpaid work. Regarding this context, Valmiki identifies himself with his caste people and writes, "They did not call us by our names. If a person were older, then he would be called "Oe Chuhre." If the person was younger or of the same age, then 'Abey Chuhre' was used." (2) The possessive pronouns 'our' and the relative pronoun us imply that Valmiki identifies himself with his Chuhra community as Limble and Jadav identified with their Mahar community.

Omprakash Valmiki is equally concerned about the Dalit issues. Regarding the contribution of Valmiki in representing the Chuhra community, Raj Kumar writes "He is convinced that only by raising caste-related issues he will be able to start a discussion on the plight of Dalits at a national level. In the meantime, the publication of *Joothan* in English has raised a lot of points related to Dalits. Valmiki announces that 'identity' is the main issue of his autobiography.

Thus we can say that the title *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* indicates that it is about the life story of an individual, it speaks about the history of the entire Chuhra community. This community has been subjected to the caste based discrimination for hundreds of years. The whole community has to depend for their livelihood on the mercy of the upper castes and by the hands of those people, they are exploited.

References:

- Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Kolkata: Samya, 2003. Print
- Valmiki, Omprakash. "Writing and Responsibility." *Journal of literature and Aesthetics* 8 (2008): 13-16. Print
- Dr. Ambedkar's Strategies against Untouchability and the Caste System by Christophe Jaffrelot, Volume III, Number 05, 2009. Print
- Kamble, Baby, *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008. Print