

Understanding the Social Struggle Through The Pains and Resistance of Om Prakash Valmiki in Joothan

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Abstract

The caste hierarchy in India has secluded countless Dalits from the mainstream of society, being socially, economically, and culturally excluded for centuries; they are compelled to live a pathetic life without routine facilities. Dalit literature is the means to exhibit their savagery. As of this caste system, Dalits have been suffering a lot. Their life is stamped with exploitation, discrimination, humiliation, and suppression. "Jo0than" is the autobiography of Om Prakash Valmiki. In that, he raised his voice against the upper caste. Dalit autobiography is not understood as the story of self-achievement rather than represent the suffering of their whole community. A Dalit writer uses his memoir to hoist his voice for those people who are forced to live a life like a hell silently. The present research paper aims to show that how a Dalit author has used his narrative to reveal the tyrannical realities of caste structure. It also reveals the mortification and hardship of a Dalit in India that how he was divested of even from essential human rights.

Keywords: Dalit Autobiography, Joothan, Om Prakash Valmiki, Indian Society, Struggles.

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Introduction

After India's independence, our country's political leaders once tried to eradicate this vicious cycle of uncertainty by imposing various sanctions on government laws and policies, confirming its dispersed status and being strengthened by the Indian Constitution, which came into force in 1950. However, the rate of untouchability removal is always limited only to record. That is to say, legal changes were made through the political framework, but the minds of many people were infected with the virus of the caste system. The Caste of India system assigns the untouchable to the lowest person in the community. This divided class of people is always oppressed and barred by the high callers of the community from climbing the social ladder and settling in a better place in society. This segregated class of people has remained downtrodden and is forbidden by the so-called upper castes of society to climb up the social ladder and settle themselves down at a better place in society. They are labeled as a depressed class or scheduled class. The untouchables embraced the term "Dalit" first coined by Jyotirao Phule and further popularised by Dr. B.R.Ambedkar.

Dalit signified the broken people and the defeated people. However, if read between the lines, it would be easier to perceive that the brokenness of people carried a silver lining of forging new self-made identities emerged from the struggles and every kind of impediment encountered in their treads of progression. To convey their unheard words, unfelt emotions, above all, rectify the misinterpreted facts of their lives. The Dalits, who have been fortunate enough to cultivate knowledge and scholarship and secured alleged high esteemed disposition in society, have articulated such reminiscence and disseminated them through the medium of cultural, literary events collectively known as Dalit literature.

A remarkable work of Dalit literature is Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography "Joothan". Firstly, one needs to find out what is Dalit literature. Sharan Kumar Limbale in *Towards the Aesthetic of Dalit Literature (2004)* explains that "Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrow, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule, and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief." (Limbale, Sarankumar, p.30) Dalit literature becomes an extremely powerful device for the Dalits to convey their wounds as well as agony against the distress and maltreatment done on them for centuries. Dalits have met tormenting and shocking affairs. They are treated as they have no right to live a life of happiness and success. They were forced to live without food, without water, and to obey the higher caste. Through literature, people in the Dalit community who felt the pain and

sufferings of their community decided to raise their voice against the domination and humiliation in a certain period of time.

Dalit autobiographies act as a separate part of Dalit literature. The type of autobiographies is clear and inclusive. Autobiography conveys the real-life experience, but it transcends the life of the author. Dalit autobiography not only talks about the life of a person suffering from caste system oppression but also speaks at the community level. One Dalit life story provides insight into the lives of many other Dalit people. Though one autobiographical character remains the locus, the stories of the supporting characters are also important to consider because autobiography document the identity of the community as well as an individual through the juxtaposition and reciprocity of 'I' and 'We' in it. (Beth, Sarah)

"Joothan" is not only the life story of a person but of the entire community who have been propelled to the fringe of caste-based distinction for ages. We see how a community totally survives on the remaining food of upper caste payment of their arduous and demeaning work. They had to stay alive on the pity of the upper caste who rather than paying their dues misused them.

Joothan is a collection of memoirs. The nature of non linearity of the story precludes the monotony to take a heavy toll on the minds of readers. It is rather a dovetail sewed with the author's fragment memories of his childhood filled with hardships pertaining to his belonging in the "Chuhra" community. Throughout the text, Valmiki makes it a point to assert the undeniable differences between the untouchables and the upper caste people, which had already been created by the caste hierarchy of society.

Joothan

Om Prakash Valmiki's great work in Dalit literature is "Joothan". In 1997, it was published. As well as in 2003, Arun Prabha Mukherjee translated it into the English language. It is a life story of the rising of an "Untouchable" from 1950 in a small village of Uttar Pradesh. Joothan is an exceptional story of a Dalit Indian journey and depicts the life in a miserable socio-economic status.

The word Jonathan originates from Hindi. It means "leftover". The food which is left behind after consuming is called Joothan. Here the leftover food acts as a prey for a community to which Valmiki belongs to. From the very meaning of the title, one can imagine the life behind it.

Originally the word "Joothan" relates the meaning as the remaining food that is left on one's plate after consuming. It is no longer in English vocabulary although it was widely used by Gandhi and Ambedkar. The word "Scrap" is somewhat

fairly accurate to “Joothan”. The heading encircles or recapitulates the dearth, discomfiture, and ache of the writer’s community. Valmiki’s “Joothan: A Dalit’s Life” provides a completely clear picture of how his community collects, preserves, and annoys Joothan. There is a historic baggage of the term “Joothan”. In his text, he reminds the words of Ambedkar and Gandhi who had advised untouchables not to accept the leftovers of the higher castes.

The title “Joothan” encloses the embarrassment, abuse, torture, and deprivation of Valmiki’s community, which collects the scraps of food from upper caste’s plate and is bound for leftovers and work without wages. They not only had to depend on Jonathan but also enjoyed it, because of their poverty and destined fate. In India, Dalit’s have been enforced to collect and eat leftovers for centuries.

“Joothan” presents the suffering and experiences of the whole Chuhra community. Valmiki’s focus travels from various memories explaining that his past is extremely marred by his present, despite the considerable distance he has traveled to move on from it. The glut of details with which they are engraved shows how firmly these past incidents are stamped in the author’s mind. His confrontation with his many school teachers depicts how Dalit students are mistreated with words also bodily and nobody comes to save. This work is the testimony to the wrong endured, obtaining the character of a sufferer who gets impacted.

Valmiki starts his autobiography with the lines, “The Life of Dalit is unbearably hurting, charred through experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literacy creation. We have full-grown in a social order that is very hard also heartless and pitiless to Dalits.” (J, VII)

Valmiki writes a complete description, of his community destined work, of gathering, preserving, and relishing Joothan. In the complete novel, Valmiki repeatedly states his affair of pain as banning because of the curse of untouchability. Also, in many other instances, Valmiki elaborates the distinguishing idiosyncrasies of the lives of Dalits than that of upper caste “Tyagis” of their village. He points out the deities worshipped by the Dalits are different from Hindu deities and their names won’t be found in any “Purana” even if one searches hard and also Dalits worship “Jaharpir” at “Janmashtami” and “Mai Madaran” during “Deepawali” in lieu of Lord Krishna and goddess “Lakshmi” respectively.

He states, how his family lives in a base near the village pond. There was filth spread everywhere. The stink was extremely strong that one suffocates within a minute. There were narrow lanes, hungry children, street dogs, daily disputes in the basti. This was the surrounding of Valmiki’s childhood. He writes, “If the people

who call the caste system an ideal social arrangement had to live in this environment for a day or two, they would change their mind.” (J, 1)

In another instance, he expresses, “I had to sit away from others in the class, that too on the floor ... sometimes they would beat me without any reason. This was an absurd tormented life that made me introvert and irritable.” (J, 3)

The author’s struggle to adjust the educational ambience of school, primarily marked by the presence of upper castes, Tyagis, was burdensome and exhausting. The fact that, so-called untouchables getting an opportunity of receiving education meant forging of arduous parity between the upper castes, Tyagi’s, and the ex-untouchables “Chuhra” which was frowned upon by the former community. Thus the untouchables became easy targets of the wrath of Tyagis. Valmiki expressed through penning down his story his helplessness when people teased him by calling him “Chuhre ke”. The credential was his determination which got him through this nauseating phase and made him what he was in his later life. The caste discrimination had expanded from his dwelling to the school, so expanded the range of animosity to the author.

There was another experience when he was assigned the duty to sweep the classrooms and playground the entire day without attending any class. He states, “The third day I went to the class and sat down quietly. After a few minutes the headmaster, loud thundering was heard: “Abey Chuhre key”, mother fucker, where are you hiding ...” He dragged me out of the class and threw me on the ground. He screamed: “Go sweep the whole playground ... otherwise, I will shove chilies up your arse and throw you out of the school.” (J, 5) This instance filled him and his father with an abyss of anguish. The ideal image of a teacher that was imprinted on his mind was completely pathetic. Valmiki’s father raised his voice with great anger about this discrimination against his son. However, what occurred was exactly unsatisfactory. Headmaster said, “Take him away from here ... The chuhra wants him educated... Go; go ... otherwise I will have your bones broken.” (J,6) Valmiki’s father was very upset with this behavior and he warned the headmaster with a loud voice, “You are a teacher ... so I am leaving now. But remember this much, Master ... This Chuhre ka will study right here ... in this school. And not just him, but there will be more coming after him.” (J, 6)

This is the harsh reality of their life in which there is no one to listen to their miseries. While his elder brother Sukhbir died at a young age, it got worse. Their financial condition was precarious because his brother was a big support in family earnings. Because of poverty suffering in the family, Valmiki could not get admitted in class six. He was very sad from the heart. He was feeling very hopeless. He told

to his mother, “Ma, I want to go to school; There were tears in my eyes.”(J, 14) After seeing Valmiki, everyone cries due to helplessness in the family. “Bhabhi opened her tin box, took out the anklet and put it in Ma’s hand, sell it and get Lallaji admitted ... The memory of that day still continues to empower me.” (J, 14)

Valmiki always wished to go to school in clean and iron clothes. To fulfill this desire, once he went to one of his classmates (who were a dhobi son) to iron his clothes but his father shouted at him saying, “Abey, Chuhre ke ... We don’t wash the clothes of Chuhra-Chamars. Nor do we iron them. If we iron your clothes, then the Tagas won’t get their clothes washed by us. We will lose our roti.” (J, 17) Such a reply broke Valmiki completely. He was thinking of this pathetic caste system. If cat, cow, and buffaloes come to them, then it is right. However if one comes in touch with a Chuhra, he or she got contaminated. Are they not humans? Valmiki came home with a heavy heart. He lost his faith in God. He writes, “One can somehow get past poverty and deprivation but it is impossible to get past caste.” (J, 18)

The exploitation was on such a high path. Even in the classroom, the untouchables are not allowed to raise a question about any point. One day when Master Saheb was teaching a lesson on Dronacharya. By listening about the dire poverty of Dronacharya that he had to provide flour mixed in water rather than milk to Ashwatthama, everyone felt pain and emotion. Then Valmiki raised a question, “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? (J, 23) In reply Master, Saheb screamed, “Chuhre ke, you dare compare yourself with Dronacharya..., Here, take this, I will write an epic on your body. He had rapidly created an epic on my back with the swishes of his stick.” (J, 23) Teacher stick wrote an epic on Valmiki’s back on that day. These marks always remind him of the hatred and hopelessness of his childhood. Every humiliating experience of childhood left Valmiki with the thought that “Studying was not going to be possible for me.” He kept reminding his father’s words, “You have to improve the cast by studying.” (J, 29)

Valmiki’s father gives a nickname for Valmiki as Munshiji. His father’s ambition for him is noticeable. Through raising voice to the humiliation suffered by them and other Dalits, he reimburses his commitment. The most forceful moment in the novel is when Valmiki raised his voice against Salaaming, In which, the bridegroom of the Chuhra community will go door to door with his mother-in-law for begging their offerings as a blessing. He writes, “The bride mother had to speak a great deal on the matter of giving before anything would be forthcoming. It was not easy to get

a cloth or a pot from anyone... but this begging of hers did not seem to have much effect. Some of them would make face, saying, the stomachs of these Chuhra are never filled.” (J, 31) These types of demeaning comments everyone has to bear during salaaming.

In his friend’s Hiram Singh wedding, while Valmiki faced this salaaming procession, he filled with anger and distress also asked his father that is it right to go for salaam?. Then his father was very much satisfied and listening to him quietly and answered “Munshiji sending you to school has been a success...I too, have understood your point... We will now break this custom.” (J, 33)

To corner Dalits in the whirlpool of poorness, these types of customs were planned. Most of the time, bridegroom and brides have to endure terrible embarrassment.

Such numerous occasions of Valmiki’s early days are slouched in him, posturing eyewitness to the mysterious reality of the past period. One of the most iconic moments in his novel is when Valmiki feel affectionate to a Brahmin girl, Savita. She was the daughter of Vinayak Kulkarni who becomes a friend with Valmiki, after a couple of meetings in Dehradun. The Kulkarni family gave him untiring affection. He never made to feel like an outsider by them. However, one day while Professor Kamble visits Kulkarni’s place, Valmiki gets to know that they treat Dalits people differently too. Valmiki realized that Kulkarni’s misunderstood him as a Brahmin. While he told his truth to Savita, she went in a great shock. He writes, “She started to cry, as though my being an SC was a crime... suddenly the distance between us had increased. The hatred of thousands of years had entered our heart what a lie culture and civilization are.” (J, 98) In this way, the pointlessness of the relationship got changed after revealing the caste. They never meet again with a promise not to reveal the caste to Savita’s father. Is this Hinduism? In which caste prides strike only the weak. Why do people of the upper class have so much hatred towards Dalits?

Conclusion

Om Prakash Valmiki suffered a lot of humiliation in his entire life. He has seen the cruelty of society since infancy. Why society is so unkind, so cruel against Dalit? Whenever he asked this question to people, “Who finds the Varna system ideal and take pride in Hindutva, rather than replying directly, they either avoid my question or get angry.” (J, 133) The bitter memory of Valmiki’s life was not able to forget by him, like a thunderbolt time and again, they burn in his mind. He writes, “The weak and the helpless have been suppressed for thousands of year..., there is

no accounting of how many talents have been wiped out by deception and treachery.”(J,39)

Time has changed, Dalits are getting an education but, “who have become educated face a terrible crisis, the cases of identity and they are trying to find an easy and instantaneous way to get out of this crisis.” (J, 126)

“Dalits want to join the mainstream of society after getting an education but the Savarna prevents them from doing so.” (J, 127)

Valmiki question, why Hindus are so many intolerants of Dalits?

A book which raises the voice of Dalits for their lawful and connects place in the society is “Joothan”. He writes, “Why is my caste only my identity.” (J, 134) Why people’s behavior changes with you after knowing that you are a Dalit? What is so bad about being Dalit? We all don’t have any hold on our birth. Then, why this discrimination prevails within communities?

The novel contradicts its reader with these types of questions about their own humanness also requests them to join this ubiquitous project of human liberation. Valmiki is the one, who tried to depict this brutal system from different points of view and reinterprets and transforms it according to his capability.

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