

Joothan: The Life of A Dalit

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Abstract

Omprakash Valmiki is a prominent figure among Hindi Dalit writers. He is a forerunner among the writers who laid the foundation for Dalit literature in Hindi. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997), besides being the autobiography of an individual, is also the tragic tale of the community to which the writer belongs. In the preface to the Hindi edition of the book, he talks of many pressures, internal as well as external, that initially inhibited the telling of this story.

KEYWORDS: Dalit Literature, poverty, oppression

The word "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit root dal- and means "broken, ground-down, downtrodden, or oppressed." The present usage of the term Dalit goes back to the nineteenth century, when a Marathi social reformer and revolutionary, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1826-1890), used it to describe the Outcastes and Untouchables as the oppressed and the broken victims of our caste-ridden society. Under the charismatic leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), this term gained greater importance and popularity. During the 1970s, the followers of the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra gave currency to the term 'Dalit' as a constant reminder of their age-old oppression, denoting both their state of deprivation and the people who are oppressed. This term for them is not a mere name or title: for them it has become an expression of hope, the hope of recovering their past self-identity. The term has gained a new connotation with a more positive meaning. It must be remembered that *Dalit does not mean Caste or low-Caste or poor*; it refers to the deplorable state or condition to which a large group of people has been reduced by social convention and in which they are now living.

Omprakash Valmiki (30 June 1950 – 17 November 2013) was an Indian Dalit writer and poet well known for his autobiography, *Joothan*, considered a milestone in Dalit literature. He was born at the village of Barla in the Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh. After retirement from Government Ordnance Factory he lived in Dehradun where he died of complications arising out of stomach cancer on 17 November 2013.

Besides *Joothan* (1997) Valmiki published three collections of poetry: *Sadiyon Ka Santaap* (1989), *Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka* (1997), and *Ab Aur Nahin* (2009). He also wrote two collections of short stories, *Salaam* (2000), and *Ghuspethiye* (2004). In addition, he wrote *Dalit Saahitya Ka Saundaryshastra* (2001) and a history of the Valmiki community, *Safai Devata* (2009), *Do Chera'* (a play).

Dalit literature is the literature of the untouchables. It is a protest against all the forms of exploitation based on class, race, caste or occupation. Omprakash Valmiki has played a vital role in the propagation of Dalit literature. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is an autobiographical account of his growing up years as an untouchable in a village in Uttar Pradesh in the newly independent India of the 1950's. "Joothan" refers to scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or animals. India's untouchables have been forced to accept and eat joothan for centuries, and the word encapsulates the pain, humiliation, and poverty of a community forced

to live at the bottom of India's social pyramid. Thus the title of the book Joothan conveys the pain and humiliation faced by the author and his community, which has remained at the bottom of the social ladder for centuries. The community has been treated like 'Joothan', to be used and thrown away in the dustbins by the upper castes. Valmiki's account of his early life is an account of the heroic struggle by a dalit boy from the sweeper caste (Bhangi, chuhra) against impossible odds to get an education. Valmiki shares his heroic struggle to survive a preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution and his transformation into a speaking subject under the influence of the great Dalit political leader, B. R. Ambedkar.

He describes, very briefly, the day to day struggle of the untouchables to arrange two square meals for themselves. At the same time he is able to demonstrate that the economic deprivation of the untouchables is the consequence of the Hindu caste order. He chronicles his own struggle to get an education in the village school. His story demonstrates that it is indeed possible for the untouchables, despite the hardships and deprivations, to emancipate themselves by persistent struggle and determination. The first part of this extract, very quickly, paints the sub-human living conditions of the Chuhras in the village. The Chuhras, Valmiki's own caste, lived across the pond, which acted as a natural barrier between the upper caste quarters and the untouchables. It demarcates not just the physical space occupied by the upper and the lower castes, but the two different worlds of existence. The Chuhras exist among filth and deprivation. The description of the basti gives us a sense of the utter deprivation faced by the untouchable community. There is an all pervading stink and one could see pigs, dogs and children roaming around in the narrow streets of this basti. In short the Chuhras lived in a physical and social space devoid of human dignity, obviously as a consequence of the caste system. Thus Valmiki's early childhood is marked by this utter deprivation and lack of dignity.

The social and psychological deprivation is compounded by economic deprivation as well. Though every member of the Valmiki household worked it was difficult for them to arrange for two decent meals in a day. This economic deprivation is also a consequence of the caste order. The Chuhras did all kinds of works for the Tagas (upper caste people) and often without pay because they dare not refuse the Tagas. Due to their lowly social position they were often abused by the upper castes and made to work for free. They were considered polluted and less than human. Ironically, one could touch animals but not Chuhras. Thus they were regarded as things to be used and abused at the convenience of the upper castes.

It is within this sub-human context that Valmiki's struggle for an education begins. The government schools, though officially open for the untouchables, refused admission to them. It was a generous Sevak Ram Masihi, a Christian, who took Valmiki into his open air school. But after a tiff with Sevak Ram, Valmiki's father took him to the Basic Primary school. After a prolonged period of begging and cajoling, Master Har Phool Singh allowed Valmiki into the school. It is important to remember that all this was happening eight years after India became independent. The practice of untouchability was very much a feature of this school. The untouchables, there were two more of them in Valmiki's class, were made to sit away from the others. What is heartening though is that the three untouchable children, though from different castes, had a bond of solidarity. Despite the humiliation by fellow students as well as the teachers the three of them persisted and continued in the school.

The experience at the school, described in these passages, highlight the cruelty and heartlessness of the teachers and fellow students. It got worse with the new Headmaster Kaliram. They were openly abused in the classroom by the teacher and

often beaten up as well. Valmiki takes the opportunity to highlight the fact that the Brahmin teacher in their school used swear words on a regular basis. This is a very effective reply to the critics who frowned upon the use of swear words in Valmiki's stories. He has tried to point out that when swear words are used in real life by people who are supposed to know Brahma (Brahmins) then it is legitimate to portray that reality in creative writing as a true depiction of lived experience.

The experience at the school leaves a lasting impression on the young Valmiki. For instance the image of the guru (teacher) that Valmiki would remember throughout his life is that of a man who would swear about his mother and sister and who would sexually abuse young boys. However the turning point for him as well as his father was an especially humiliating experience forced upon the young Valmiki by the Headmaster Kaliram who seems to be a rabid casteist. He orders the frail boy to sweep the school compound day after day. Valmiki suffered this indignity for three days. On the fourth day his father discovered him with a broom in his hand sweeping the school compound. In one decisive gesture his father, instead of quietly suffering the indignity, confronts the Headmaster. The courage and fortitude shown by his father is indeed remarkable. Expectedly Valmiki was thrown out of the school. But his father was not going to give up easily. He promised the Headmaster that Valmiki would indeed study in the same school and that he will ensure that more untouchables would follow Valmiki to the school. With dogged determination Valmiki's father, with the help of the village Pradhan 'Chaudhri Saheb', managed to send him back to school thus ensuring that his own son as well as others are not denied education in the village school because of their caste.

Joothan, a self conscious Dalit literary text, makes a powerful statement against the oppressive caste system still prevalent in most parts of India. Valmiki's use of autobiography helps him to occupy a vantage subject position from which he presents a Dalit's lived experience. The 'true to life' format of the autobiography helps him to lay bare the brutality inherent in the caste system, which consequently becomes a powerful argument in favour of dismantling this undesirable form of social organization. At the same time, Valmiki's own struggles and success, acts as motivation for others to struggle and achieve their goals. Joothan symbolizes the struggle for dignity and human rights and demonstrates that a revolutionary transformation of society is not just desirable but possible as well.

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