
A Study of Marginalized and Suppressed Voices of Dalit's in Omprakash

Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*

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Abstract

Dalit literature is a stage where one writes about oppressed, marginalized, downtrodden and subjugated people, which are none but the Dalits. Dalit literature is not a new one, it is since when the dalits raised their voices against the discrimination of class, color, caste etc. and started to write on paper. In history there are many prominent Dalit writers like Shanker Rao Karat, S. M. Mate, Daya Pawar, Baby Kamble, Nana Sahib Zodge, Miteli Kawada, Jina Amcha and Maillika Dhasal who wrote about dalits and raised their voices against injustices. Prominent writers like Kanwal Bharti, Kancha Ilaiah, Dev Kumar and Omprakash Valmiki shares the same sphere to raise the voice of Dalits. Omprakash Valmiki wrote his autobiography entitled *Joothan:A Dalits Life* in which he shares his bitter experiences of life being a dalit. In his book Valmiki ji shows the pain and agony suffered by him through his whole life.

Keywords: Untouchability, Dalit, Marginalization.

This research paper tries to show the hardships of marginalized and oppressed people through the personal experiences of Valmiki. Untouchability and discrimination are ubiquitously present in Indian society since Manu established the Varna system to Indian society. Later on this varna system took an ugly face in the form of untouchability and rigid caste system. Our present writer is also the prey to this untouchability and caste system. While writing his autobiography Valmiki ji wrote, the Dalit readers had seen their own pain in those pages of mine.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* starts with an account of his birth and upbringing as an untouchable, in caste ridden society. Valmiki stated his notion behind writing the autobiography in the preface to the Hindi edition of the book. According to him, Dalit life is excruciatingly painful and charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creation. We have grown-up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman and unsympathetic towards Dalits. He further writes: "One can somehow get past poverty and

deprivation but it is impossible to get past caste."(valmiki18) Valmiki says that the chuhras were not seen as human beings but considered lower than dogs, cats, cows or buffaloes. They were utilized until the work was done and after that throw them away. Valmiki portrays the picture of caste discrimination in *Joothan*. He asserts:

‘Caste’ is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, ‘caste’ 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 cultural heritage, did they decided which homes they would be born into? Albeit they turn to scriptures to justify their position, the scriptures that establish feudal values instead of promoting equality and freedom. (133-134)

Valmiki gives the description of their houses situated in villages. He tells us that on the one side there are Taga’s house and on the other side the houses of Chuhra, Chamar and Jhinwar community. Next he tells us how they were addressed by the Taga’s, they use to call an elderly person as ‘Oe Chuhre’ and if the person is of same age or younger one then ‘Abey Chuhre’. No doubt that after independence many rules and regulations were made to abolishes this kind of malpractice. But all is not fruitful till now.

The Constitution of India gives the right to equality to every citizen of India through which every citizen, in any religion, caste and class is equal. Even it opens the door of free and quality education for every child, but dalits are deprived of education and admission in schools. Valmiki through his self example exhibits the hardships of his Dalits for getting admission in the school. Valmiki’s illiterate father, Chotan, wished to facilitate his son with proper education because the family of the writer believed that education is the only medium through which his caste could be improved and rehabilitated. Valmiki gets the admission in a school after the frequent visits and requests of his father, and with the help of Master Har Phool Singh. But instead of learning, Valmiki faces a lot of humiliation and exploitation there. He used to “sit away from the others in the class, that too on the floor” and sometimes he “would have to sit away behind everybody, right near the door. And the letters on the board from there seemed faded” (2-3). He had to wait for other person’s, who belonged to higher castes, mercy for getting water to quench his thirst because he did not have right to take water directly from the pot and other sources. Valmiki further goes on to tell the humiliation he faced during his school time.

One day his Headmaster Kaliram comes to class and asks Valmiki about his name and caste, after hearing his caste he becomes angry and says to Valmiki ‘All right. . . See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation.’ So one can easily see and feel the pain of Dalits, who are marginalized and subjugated from each corner of the society.

After this incident Valmiki’s father was passing through the school and his father saw him sweeping the ground. When his father comes to know about the truth his father becomes very furious and take him in front of headmaster and argues with headmaster very aggressively. From this incident Valmiki had a great impact on his personality.

Pitaji snatched the broom from my hand and threw it away. His eyes were blazing. Pitaji who was always taut as a bowstring in front of others was so angry that his dense moustache was fluttering. He began to scream, ‘Who is the teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep?’ (Valmiki 6)

Writer gives another instance of shame and humiliation, when he tells about a marriage function in village, how the Dalits work for them all day and night and do all odd sorts of work like donkey and in last they wait for their reward “Joothan” the left over meal of the bridegroom’s party. Valmiki writes:

During a wedding, when eating the guests and the baratis, the bridegroom’s party, were eating their meals, the Chuhras would sit outside with huge baskets. After the baratis had eaten, the dirty pattals or leaf-plates were put in Chuhras’ baskets, which they took home, to save the joothan sticking to them. The little pieces of pooris, bits of sweetmeats, and a little bit of vegetables were enough to make them happy. The joothan was eaten with a lot of relish. The bridegroom’s guests who didn’t leave enough scraps on their pattals were denounced as gluttons. Poor things, they had never enjoyed a wedding feast. So they had licked it all up. During the marriage season, our elders narrated, in thrilled voices, stories, of the baratis that had left several months of joothan.(9)

The writer depicts an exemplary action of boldness of his mother in a marriage function of the village. This episode is directly related to the title of the autobiography, and left a deep impact on the child Valmiki's mind. There was an awkward custom in the writer's village, Barla, in which the people of *Chuhra* community used to render their manual services in any big functions or rituals like marriage, and in lieu of these they received the remaining *joothan* from the plates of the guests in their respective baskets as a reward of their services. They did not have the privilege to get the fresh food directly from the kitchen. Once in a function Valmiki's mother asked the head of the family, Mr. Sukhdev Singh Tyagi, to get some more food for her hungry children but he said in abusive words, "You are taking a basketful of *joothan*. And on the top of that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going" (11). These words pierced Valmiki's heart like a sharp dart, and made him annoyed till the last breath of his life. Like a lioness his mother made vacant her basket in front of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi and roared in her rage, "Pick it up and put it inside your home. Feed to the *baratis* tomorrow morning" (11). She left the door of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi in her full pace and never turned up again in her life. This action is the outcome of suppressed revolt of *Chuhras'* against Tyagi's hegemonic power which exploits and humiliates them in every step of life.

Writer gives more instances that how the high class people were not happy with the progress of a low community boy. When he tops in his exams, he was honoured by making as the class monitor, but some of his teachers were not happy. Writer further goes on to write more humiliating experiences that how they were made to wait drink water during exams, "During 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."(Valmiki 16) one time he got a chance to wear a khaki uniform for the scouts. His teacher Rameshchand had asked that the uniform be washed and ironed. He washed his khaki uniform with great care but the problem was how to get it ironed. He went with his friend whose father was a dhobi. But to his dismay he was welcomed by his friend's father when he screamed at him, "Abey chuhre ka, where do you think you are going? ... 'We don't wash the clothes of the Chuhra-Chamars. Nor do we iron them"(Valmiki 17)

The author portrays the condition of hunger and hopelessness of his marginalised caste in the autobiography through the example of his family. It used to happen several times in the author's house when no one could be able to get food to satisfy his hunger. Valmiki's mother boiled the begged small amount of rice in a big pot with mere water. Once the rice had boiled

mother gave *mar* or rice water to the children for drink. This is the expression of extreme poverty and starvation that the children like *mar* more than milk, and the value of *mar* was more than cow's milk for them because perhaps they have not got milk in their life. This situation became worse in the rainy season because marginalised villagers did not get labour in agriculture, home and other sectors for earning the wages. Valmiki paints the gloomy picture of his colony during this season as:

The lanes filled up with mud, making walking very difficult. The mud was full of pig's excrement, which would begin to stink after that rain stopped. Flies and mosquitoes thrived like clouds of locusts. It became extremely difficult to go outside. Our arms and legs would get smeared with dirt. The feet became mangy. The space between the toes filled up with reddish sores. Once these sores started to itch, they would itch nonstop. (19)

The pain of being a Dalit is seen vividly on every page of his autobiography, Valmiki recalls another incident when he met a girl named Savita. One day, she invited him at her home for a cup of tea. He asked to Savita when he saw scheduled caste candidate who was given a cup of tea in another pot. He asked her:

You had given him tea in a different cup? Yes, the SCs and the Muslims who come to our house, we keep their dishes separate, Savita replied evenly. .Do you think this discrimination is right? I asked. She felt the sharp edge in my voice now. Oh...why, are you mad? How can we feed them in the same dishes? Why not? In the hotel...in the mess, everyone eats together. Then what is wrong in eating together in your home as well? I tried to reason with her. Savita defended the discrimination as right and justified by tradition. Her arguments were infuriating me. However, I remained calm. According to her, SCs were uncultured. Dirty. (Valmiki 97)

One more instance where Valmiki felt ashamed, being a Dalit (Chuhra) was when he was coming back to Chandrapur via Delhi after a trip to Rajasthan. In the train they met with a good looking family and in some time the two families become friends. In the mean time when they come to know about the writers caste, all thing went wrong "as soon as they heard the word 'Bhangi' they lapsed into total silence. There was no communication between the two families during the rest of journey."(Valmiki 133)

Conclusion:

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is a true account of the writer's bitter experiences in the Hindu caste ridden society but it represents, through his isolations, insults, ill-treatment from society, discrimination, humiliation and an object of ridicule for the people of upper caste and class, the pain and suffering of whole marginalised Dalit communities who bear these disgraces since their birth at every step of their life. Thus, the autobiography is series of painful struggles of a human being for dignity and respect. His calibre helped him to put those bitter experiences in front of the world in the hope of a new dawn for his upcoming generation. Meanwhile; it is also the story of a Dalit family in search of Dalit dignity and identity. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, as an autobiography exhibits all the features and qualities of a true life story. But the relevance of this work is beyond the boundary of an autobiography since it stands as a symbol for the untouchable or Dalit community. Dalit literature looks at the things from the Dalit's point of view. These motives of Dalit literature are nicely brought out in *Joothan* by Valmikiji. He is the one who had suffered a lot socially, economically and culturally, and wrestled against all odds in order to cherish the dreams of his life.

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