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Joothan: The Eventful Journey of a Dalit Man from Dust to a Man of Substance

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Abstract

A Dalit is a victim of the inexorable caste-system. He has no self respect and is treated like an animal by the members of the upper-caste. A careful observation of a Dalit's life reveals that a Dalit woman is someone who gets doubly marginalised. On one hand, she is victimised by a frustrated Dalit man while on the other she gets subdued by the caste-centric society. The curse of untouchability has led to the physical repression of the Dalits. With the passage of time, many dalits have raised their voices to change the system. Dalit autobiography is one such medium of protest. It has enriched literature by expressing things related to the varna system. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is an earnest attempt through which he has registered his protest against a compassionless society manipulated by casteism. The current paper makes an attempt to study *Joothan* (2007), a Dalit autobiography that shows a man's suffering and struggle to establish his identity as a member of the society. The paper explores the ways in which the writer has presented his eventful life through various incidents that had shaped his personality. The book is life itself as in every page, the author has given us a thorough description of Dalit life and the challenges associated with it.

Keywords- *Victim, Marginalised, Untouchability, Casteism, Identity, Challenges*

Dalit autobiographies have been accused of being too "repetitive and stereotypical" (J xxviii) with "outpourings" (J xxviii) that portray an individual's encounter with a stoic system. However, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) is a unique attempt that serves as an inspiring tale of ceaseless struggle of one man against unpleasant circumstances. By doing so, it shows how a man from a poor background can act as an "agent of resistance" (Abrams and Harpham, 2012: 307) against all odds. Valmiki begins his tale by giving us an account of the Chuhra basti and its many challenges which they had to face:

On the edges of the pond were the homes of the Chuhras. All the women of the village, young girls, older women, even the newly married brides, would

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sit in the open space behind these homes at the edges of the pond to take a shit. Not just under the cover of darkness but even in daylight...Our family lived in this Chuhra Basti. Five brothers, one sister, two chachas, one tau and his family (J 1).

With a family as big as that, Valmiki's parents could hardly do anything to give a good upbringing to their children. The problem of untouchability was one more hurdle that made life hell for them. In one of his shocking revelations, Valmiki mentions "that while it was considered alright 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..." (J 2). This was their condition. Valmiki and his kind were labelled as untouchables. They were compelled to live in an environment filled with stench and were socially paralysed by the caste system.

With the support of his family, Valmiki could go to Master Sewak Ram Maihi's open-air school where he learnt his alphabets. Later, through the efforts of his father, he got admitted to a school. This was a golden opportunity for this Dalit boy called Valmiki:

The word 'Dalit' is now fast supplanting the other generic names for persons descended from the old untouchable castes. This is a word in the Marathi language of Western India, and is apparently derived from Sanskrit. In an 1831 dictionary, the word is defined as 'ground' or 'broken or reduced to pieces generally' (Molesworth's Marathi-English dictionary 1831). It was seemingly first used in the context of caste oppression by the great nineteenth century reformer Phule... (Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 1998: 3-4).

Though a Dalit, Valmiki was in no way inferior to any of his friends who belonged to the upper caste. Moreover the doors of the government schools which were opened for all after independence helped individuals like Valmiki to uplift their social status. However, such positive changes that heralded the beginning of a new era could not change the mentality of the ordinary men who were still chained by the caste system. Valmiki's account of his school days is quite tragic and makes this clear: "I had to sit away from the others in the class, that too on the floor...Sometimes I would have to sit way behind everybody, right near the door. And the letters on the board from there seemed faded" (J 2-3). Thus, the school too became "a place of unchanging oppression and minimal opportunity" (Hunt, 2014: 179).

Thus, Valmiki got victimized all the time. He was even forced to sweep the school compound and eat "the joothan" or "scraps" (J 9) that was put in his basket. Being a Chuhra, Valmiki's family was entrusted with the "responsibility to dispose of dead cattle in the village... No wages were paid for this work" (J 33). His family was helpless before this old custom that was filled with humiliation and disgrace. Valmiki, too, did the same: "I have not been able to forget these bitter memories. They flash in my mind like lightning every now

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and then. Why is it a crime to ask for the price of one's labour" (J 39). Such questions constantly harrowed his mind.

Valmiki's urge to educate himself gave him the strength to face abuse. At last he could sit for his high school examination. He passed the examination. His small but dynamic world got enlightened with books such as The Gita. Later, he took science in class eleven with a lot of hope and enthusiasm. But his life in college was not immune to the "assaults of untouchability" (J 65). His caste-centric chemistry teacher, Brajpal Singh harassed him and kept him out of the lab. As a result, he scored poor marks in Chemistry and was devastated: "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" (J 66). Thus he felt helpless and miserable. A similar situation has been depicted by Sharankumar Limbale who had to face a lot of discrimination while growing up:

How is a person born with his caste? How does he become untouchable as soon as he is born? How can he be a criminal by birth? From his feet Lord Bhrama gave birth to a vast low caste community. Since then this community has been living as untouchables... (TO 82).

But Valmiki was invincible and with fresh zeal and determination, he headed towards Dehradun. DAV college became his next destination where he got admitted. A new environment was waiting for him with new friends and Valmiki was ready to face it. The most interesting thing that he encountered at this stage was a book on Dr. Ambedkar. The name of the book was *Dr. Ambedkar: A Biography*. Its author was Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu. Ambedkar was a person who gave new direction to the Dalits. Unfortunately, most of the libraries at that time had no books on him or his philosophy and so Valmiki had no idea about who he was:

Ambedkar was an unknown entity to me then. I knew about Gandhi, Nehru, Patel...but was completely ignorant about Dr. Ambedkar. I had never heard this name. Despite my twelve years of studying in Tyagi Inter College, Barla, this name had not come to my knowledge in any way or shape. The college library also did not have a single book on Ambedkar... (J 71).

It was indeed a shocking discovery made by our protagonist as Ambedkar was the maker of Indian Constitution. It also reflected a "visibly brahminised" (Ilaiah 56) system of education where Dalit personalities had no mention:

...While we were students we were not told about the greatness of Phule or Ambedkar who were as competent as Gandhi and Nehru were. We were always told only Gandhi, Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and so on, people we could never relate to, people whose upbringing had nothing to do with our upbringing...The national movement was presented as a Brahmin-Baniya fight

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against colonial masters. Nowhere were we told that it was the Dalitbahujan masses who played the key role in driving the British out (I 58).

Ambedkar's philosophy gave a new hope to Valmiki. In his speech, Dr. Ambedkar "introduced his famous call to action- Shikha, Sanghatit Vha, Sangharsh Kara- 'Educate, Organize, Agitate!'" (ITTS 79). These three fiery words were enough to inspire Valmiki. He was in extreme poverty and yet he was determined to continue with his studies. His pockets were empty and he spent many winters without warm clothes. Later he joined the Ordnance Factory, Dehradun, as an apprentice and after a year's training, he sat in a competitive exam and was selected to go to Jabalpur for further training. There he spent two tiring years after which he was got selected to go to Bombay (now Mumbai) for another two and a half year's training. He also received a monthly stipend from the government. It was also an eventful time for Valmiki as he got introduced to Marathi Dalit literature which made him stronger. He also wrote an essay on the problems of Dalits which was sent to Navbharat Times.

After the completion of his training, Valmiki got appointed to the Ordnance Factory Chanda (Chandrapur) and finally on 27th December 1973, he married a girl called Chanda. In 1974, he also started a theatre group called Meghdoot Natya Sanstha. Valmiki was also associated with the magazine Nimayak Bhim that published his writings on Dalit issues and attended meetings. However, his participation in the Dalit movement was not welcomed by people around him who were mostly savarnas who thought that he was working to "destroy their hegemony" (J 112). His writings got criticized as he wrote on "the cruelties of caste" (Walsh, 1990: 63).

The monotonous description of personal experiences that readers generally find in an autobiography is fortunately not seen in *Joothan* where the author (though not frequently) manages to give an account of events that had rocked the nation at that time: "It was January 1984. An incident took place in Malkapur in Amravati district...In a Marathi textbook meant for class seven, there was a lesson on Dr. Ambedkar. All the students ripped out the lesson on the orders of a Brahmin teacher. The class had some Mahar students and they had felt that ripping out the lesson was wrong...picked up the torn pages from the rubbish and taken them home to show them to their families. The news spread. Protests began" (j 112). Such incidents were enough to ignite the minds of intellectuals like Valmiki who fearlessly wrote on such narrow-mindedness of the society.

Valmiki's association with personalities like Dr. Gangadhar Pantavne and Virendra Mishra whom he met at Dr Naidu's place gave him inspiration to work on and on. He penned poetry, drama and short stories on untouchability and caste discrimination. He wrote, "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..." (j 133).

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Both Valmiki and his wife had good and bad experiences. There were numerous occasions during which he and his family got humiliated because of their Bhangi origin. A family whom he had met in 1980 in the Pink City Express gave his family a cold shoulder when it came to know that the Valmikis were Bhangis. But this did not in any way slow down Valmiki's progress. Finally, on November 17, 2013, Valmiki breathed his last after battling with cancer for two years. His absence is a major loss that somehow gets compensated through his writings on Dalits.

It is also important to mention that "autobiographical narratives by Dalits do not celebrate the rise of an individual to a position of power and glory" (Kumar, 2010: 151). However, Valmiki's *Joothan* does make an earnest attempt to chronicle an eventful journey of a man who had nothing of his own to a man of substance whose powerful voice could speak for the Dalits "who were just like animals, but without tails" and "lived in abject poverty" (TPWB 49).

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