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Abstract:

Instead of being a source of pride, Dalit autobiographies document the author's struggles against the caste system. As a form of 'intellectual propaganda' meant to raise awareness, they show Dalits being treated poorly. Authors from the Dalit community in India, such as Omprakash Valmiki, Laxman Mane, Narendra Jadhav, Laxman Gayakwad, Baby Kamble, Sharankumar Limbale, etc., have presented an accurate depiction of Dalit society in their writings. Omprakash Valmiki, a great Dalit writer, brings to life his own life in his autobiography "Joothan," making him one of the most famous Hindi authors. Joothan, written by Omprakash Valmiki, has its origins in Ambedkarite philosophy. The oppressed make their way from a search for self-discovery to a desire for social parity.

Key words: Dalit, Autobiography, Pain, Suffering, Devaluation, Intellectual, Propaganda, Ambedkarite, Equality.

The rise of Dalit writers in India is a major trend that has influenced not only literary culture but also societal outlook. The term "Dalit" did not enter common usage until after India's independence. While speaking at the first Dalit Solidarity conference in Nagpur, A.C. Lal made the following observation: "The Word 'Dalit' is a beautiful word because it transcends narrow national and sectarian frontiers. It is a beautiful word because it embraces the sufferings, frustrations, expectations and groaning of the entire cosmos". (Lal 1995: XIII).

One of India's most prominent literary critics, G.N. Devy, viewed the writings of Dalit authors as representing a bourgeois nationalist viewpoint. Authors of this new self-awareness, he argued, demonstrate a "Clear awareness of belonging to distinct literary culture and society" because of Dr. Ambedkar's effect on their work. (Devy,126). Social reformers like Jyotiba Phule and Shahu maharaj may trace their origins back to the fertile soil of Maharashtra. The social reformers who spoke out did so in opposition to the Brahmin-dominated caste system's rulers. The two towering figures of Jyotiba Pule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar are credited with initially popularizing the term Dalit to replace the term "untouchable" in India. It wasn't until a group of young Marathi writers and activists created an organization called Dalit panthers in 1972 that the word "Dalit" literature became widely known. Communities once considered untouchable in India now have a name: Dalits. In her preface to Joothan, Arun Prabha mukharji says:

“Dalit’ is a political identity as opposed to a caste one. It expresses Dalit’s knowledge of themselves as oppressed people and signifies their resolve to demand liberation through a revolutionary transformation of the system that oppresses them”. (Joothan-XII). One of the major shifts in Dalit cultural politics was the release of tiny periodicals and essays by the group known as Dalit Panthers. The Dalit panthers fought back against the accepted norms of language, literature, and culture. Additionally, it provided fresh opportunities for expressive expression. There was a flowering of Dalit writing, with autobiography being the most popular genre among Dalits.

Even after seven decades of independence, high caste landowners continue to commit acts of physical violence against Dalits, including mass massacres and rapes. Rarely is the perpetrator of such brutality brought to justice. Without Dalit literature, their protest would go unnoticed and untold. For the sake of spreading 'intellectual propaganda' and raising social, economic, and political consciousness, Dalit memoirs play a key role. These autobiographies depict the current, raw, and realistic situations of the poor.

Throughout India, several authors who were not themselves Dalit have written about India's underprivileged communities. They used their art to bring attention to the situation of the Dalits. A number of authors, including Shivaram karant, Mulkraj Anand, Premachand, Arundati Roy, etc.,

have addressed the unfortunate situation of the untouchables in their works. Choman Dudi, a novel by Shivaram Karant, was praised for its realistic portrayal of the struggles of low-caste society. However, it is stated that non-Dalit authors cannot truly understand the hardships endured by Dalits. "That literary work will be the best which raised the highest degree of " Dalit consciousness," (Joothan, p-113) Sharankumar Limbale says.

Authors from the Dalit community in India, such as Omprakash Valmiki, Laxman Mane, Narendra Jadhav, Laxman Gayakwad, Baby Kamble, Sharankumar Limbale, etc., have presented a realistic and compelling portrait of Dalit society in their writings. All of these Dalit authors, in fact, have turned to autobiography most frequently. Arun Prabha Mukharjee observes: "'Dalit' autobiography, then is not just a remembering of things past, but a shaping and structuring of them in such a way as to help understand one's life and the social order that shaped it, on the one hand, and to arouse a passion for change in the Dalit reader, on the other". [Joothan XXIV].

Omprakash Valmiki, a great Dalit writer, brings to life his own life in his autobiography "Joothan," making him one of the most famous Hindi authors. In the realm of Hindi literature, he is both a prominent poet and critic. The impoverished existence of Dalits is vividly portrayed in Omprakash Valmiki's works. In Joothan, he describes his upbringing as a member of the Chuhra caste, which was considered untouchable in Uttar Pradesh long before the term "Dalit" was even coined. Writing about Joothan, Sumit Guha, an eminent professor in the University of Texas, observes: "A searing memoir of the life of a sensitive, and intelligent Dalit youth in independent India. It tells us how he overcome contempt, humiliation and violence to gain an education and join the slowly growing ranks of Dalit intellectuals in India". (Joothan, cover page).

Without a doubt, Valmiki's journey to becoming a freer human being in a society that remains "compassionless towards Dalits" is shown in Joothan, a story of tremendous loss and persecution. The Hindi edition came out in 1993. Professor of English at York University in Toronto, Arun Prabha Mukherjee, published an English translation of Joothan in 2003. Joothan literally translates to "what's left on the plate" in Hindi. It's tragic that Valmiki's people had to resort to using joothan as a source of income since they were so poor. Conflict between Chuhra (Dalit) and Tagas (upper caste) of Barla is shown in the autobiography. The suffering caused by Dalit people's poverty, shame, and abuse is all summed up in Joothan. Because they had no other means of support, the residents of the Chuhra community collected and subsisted on joothan. Valmiki has great recollections of guarding the drying joothan from crows and hens and of enjoying the joothan once it has been dried and reprocessed. When the stomach is empty, so are the pride and ego. The experiences of Dalits in India are proof of this. Most of them have sacrificed their dignity for the sake of securing enough food to continue living.

Valmiki brings to life the vile impact that poverty has on a person's life. He describes how the Chuhras, the groom's family, would sit outside with enormous baskets while the guests and baratis ate. After the baratis had finished eating, the churas would take the soiled pattals or leaf plates home in their baskets to prevent the joothan from clinging to them. They were content with the teeny tiny morsels of pooris, sweets, and vegetables. A lot of gusto was shown while devouring the joothan. Gluttons were called out among the groom's guests who didn't leave enough food on their pattals. They were poor saps who had never experienced a wedding feast. That means they licked every last drop. (Joothan, p-9).

Several incidences of caste discrimination are recounted by Valmiki. Even in the classroom, chuhras were met with skepticism. He writes: "Take him away from here...The Chuhra wants him educated...Go, go...Otherwise I will have your bones broken". (Joothan, p-6). When Valmiki approached a dhobi for ironing his uniform, he replied: "We don't wash the clothes of the Chuhra-Chamaras. 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". (Joothan, p-17). Valmiki was very much hurt by the attitude of upper caste people towards Dalits. He writes: "My heart was heavy. I had lost faith in God. One can somehow get past poverty and deprivation but it is impossible to get past caste". (Joothan, p-18).

Joothan authentically portrays various forms of social and legal injustices. In the class room, the teacher while narrating the Dronacharya – Ashwathama episode, was almost with tears in his eyes. The teacher and the students are moved with profound pity for Dronacharya's dire poverty. Here Valmiki, being a Dalit student, asks a question to the teacher: "...What about us who had to drink mar? How we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't an epic poet ever write a word on our lives?". (Joothan, p-23). The hypocrisy of the upper caste people was exposed when the teacher started beating Valmiki for asking a question. An untouchable daring to talk back was beyond toleration. Here Valmiki quite emphatically writes: "He had rapidly created an epic on my back with the swishes of his stick. That epic is still inscribed on my back. Reminding me of those hated days of hunger and hopelessness, this epic composed out of a feudalistic mentality is inscribed not just on my back, but on each nerve of my brain". (Joothan, P.23).

Valmiki frequently asks his readers to reflect on their own humanity. He does not let up in his pursuit to expose the hypocrisy of those who profess to care about humanity but whose daily actions betray their words. When speaking about such matters, his tone becomes cruelly sardonic. It's fascinating to see how Valmiki often doubles as a critique of the poet's own work. He holds his own people responsible for their acceptance of Brahminism. Arun Prabha Mukharjee makes the following observation about Joothan: "Joothan, then, is a multivalent, polyvocal text, healing the fractured self through narrating; contributing to the archive of Dalit history; opening a dialogue with the silencing oppressors; providing solace as well as frank criticism to his own people". (Joothan, P-XXXVIII).

As can be seen, Joothan has a lot of questions that need to be answered. Valmiki closes his autobiography by questioning Indian civilization in general: "': 'The Hindus who worship trees and plants, beasts and birds, why are they intolerant of Dalits?... Poverty, illiteracy, broken lives, the pain of standing outside the door, how would be civilized suvarna Hindus know it?... Why is my caste my only identity?'. (Joothan, p-134).

In India, caste determines everything. Dalits have great challenges in achieving their civic, political, economic, social, and cultural rights because of caste. The caste system in India is discriminatory and brutal, threatening the Dalits' basic identity. When Valmiki disclosed his caste status before Savita, who had actually proposed to her, she couldn't take it in. Savita burst into tears as it was revealed that Valmiki is a Chuhra. Valmiki writes: "She started to cry, as though my being an SC was a crime. She sobbed for a long time. Suddenly the distance between us had increased. The hatred of thousands of years had entered our hearts. What a lie culture and civilization are". (Joothan p-98).

Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki is based on Ambedkarite ideas. It follows the oppressed on their path from identification to social equality. Valmiki projects Dalits' lives and sufferings in the name of caste hierarchy through his self-narrative. Dalits have been constantly reminded by writers such as Valmiki and others that they must struggle for their rights; education is the only way out of the clutches of social evils. Thus, Joothan causes us to consider the injustices of our social environment and attempts to empower the oppressed through a consciousness that leads to the process of social change.

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