



OM PRAKASH VALMIKI'S "JOOZHAN": A TRUE PICTURE OF THE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT:

Valmiki has always been vocal regarding the voice of the dalit community, the main aim of his works have been to raise the voice for the downtrodden people. This work has been taken for the research work due to its strong contents which are very powerful enough to bring the main point to the view of the people of India. He used Dalit literature as a tool to present a communal trauma of his community. Earlier it was very difficult to recognise such voice as has been Valmiki's but as of now, his voice has been well recognized. He speaks for the right for his society. He himself faces a great discrimination in his whole life due to being a Dalit. He always believed that a human must be a free person. His autobiography points out the problems and predicaments of the dalit people in the Hindu society. He emphasizes the significance of literature by endowing the platform in spreading the knowledge about Dalit lives and their individual experience in this civil society. Dalit Studies are not discussed generally and become a rare glimpse that very few talk about it and dare enough to write. Omprakash Valmiki tries his best to raise the voice of the downtrodden people which has been suppressed for the time immemorial. His writings have created a sense of consciousness in the downtrodden people of the society.

KEYWORDS:

MARGINALIZED, DALIT, SOCIETY, AND CONSCIOUSNESS.

I. INTRODUCTION

Autobiography has always been one of the best tools to express one's inner turmoil. It has proved a handy tool as a literary genre for the Dalit writers because their experience claims authenticity. Some writers do not think so as they take this literary form formless experience of the dalits which is recurring and conventional. As an answer to this, Valmiki has quoted in "Das's defence of the genre, that Dalit writers should write autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive, but also our true portrayals of wrongdoers" (Valmiki: xxviii). Dalits did not get the right to write easily but they had to make a long series of struggles for their rights to express their pain in writing. Earlier their life style was portrayed by others, by non-Dalits, dramatists, novelists and historians.

Valmiki himself is victim of this society so he very well expresses the situation of the dalits.

Dalit autobiography is written in a way of remembering the past of the writer. One can say that his works make some changes in the society for the welfare of the poor who are none but the dalits. He creates the enthusiasm in his people so that they can live their lives positively. Joozhan has become a pioneer autobiography in Hindi which has an outlook of personal - condemn among the Dalits

"Joozhan: A Dalit's Life" is not just a text book but a life history representing each dalit in the Hindu society as this text contributes to Dalit history and its narration acts as a healing texture to the oppressors. He writes about the real situation of the society and portrays the brutal realities very strongly and emphasizes that India has not kept its

promise fully that made in the Indian constitution of independence.

Translator Arun Mukherjee says "Valmiki's work has broken the hegemony of high caste literary establishment which can no longer continue to present its choice as universal and timeless, by producing their own discourse and publishing it in Dalit run little magazines; they have created a space for Dalit writing and Dalit readership" (xxx).

The title Joozhan has been intentionally used by him as dalits are no more than joozhan in this society. Through this work he replicates the day-to-day experience of lower caste people's life. It means 'leftover'. The food which is left behind after consuming is called Joozhan. 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. The word "Joozhan" in Hindi cannot be substituted in English as "leftover", it has no pessimistic meaning because the leftover food has a meaning that it can be consumed for the next time. But originally the word "Joozhan" relates the meaning as the remaining food that is left in one's plate after consuming. . . It is no longer in English vocabulary although it was widely used by Gandhi and Ambedkar.

Many great leaders have made their great efforts and fought against the caste inequality even before independence also to make life of the dalits easier but they failed in their mission. They could never be successful in their ideology to get rid of untouchability and to raise the oppressed class. The education and other facilities

provided by the Britishers' claimed a niche for the continuation of the caste. Nevertheless, it is doubtful to state that even today India has not wholly eradicated the caste system.

Autobiography was used by many writers to give vent to their inner conflicts. It is established that autobiography shares the ideology of marginalized issues which are silenced for a long time. Valmiki has to be appreciated for his genre selection. Though there are various genres of writing, it is significant or crucial to examine the language and presentation which shapes the idea of what the author wants to express. Valmiki's choice of autobiographical genre is quite deliberate. It presents a review of the domineering caste system in different ways. The author in this genre is able to convey a sense of not just his experience of pain, struggle and suffering but encompasses the general condition of the whole Dalit community. The need for the study is to show how Omprakash Valmiki has expressed his voice of protest and look for communal development by integrating those human values.

This article aims to bring a great difference in the society for the dalits "Omprakash Valmiki's, Joothan: A Dalit's Life" is a tradition-breaking Indian autobiography that shattered the traditional literature. "Joothan: A Dalit's Life", is one such autobiography with a Dalit protagonist that epitomises each and every dalit of the Indian soil. It is an autobiographical account of Valmiki. The experiences portrayed in Joothan cannot be found in any other literary work, especially which represents his dwelling place, his home town 'Barla', his birth in Chuhra community, his struggle for his education, corporeal and psychological harassment, his conversion into a speaking subject, recorder of the oppression and exploitation he endured, not only as an individual but also as a whole for his oppressed community. These things were never represented in the archives of Hindi literature.

Valmiki's family lived in the ChuhraBasti of this village. He was the youngest one in the family. Everyone in his family did some or the other work like cleaning, agricultural work and general labour under Taga's, still they found it difficult to feed their hunger for a day. Nobody was paid for their work. The Chuhras were seen below the sub-human level and they were simply used as a material until their work was done.

Education played a major part in Valmiki's autobiography as without education he could have become nothing. It is education which instills power and awareness in dalits. When he was admitted to school, he faced great problems for he was dalit and dalit had no right to education. The school where he was admitted for his primary education didn't allow the children from Basti, Chuhra community to enroll. His father was a great follower of education and begged the 'headmaster that, "I will be forever in your debt if you teach this child of mine a letter or two" (2). It has been since long the country has got its independence and freedom; "Gandhiji's uplifting of the untouchables were resounding everywhere although the school doors of government schools had begun to open for untouchable,

the mentality of the ordinary people had not changed much"(2). They might become everything but their lower caste background chained them at every step to the slavery of the society. It was not a path of roses for Valmiki when he started education as he was beaten and abused daily by his upper caste teachers for no reason except being a dalit. Valmiki says: "If I repeat his (teacher) abusive words here, they would smear the nobility of Hindi" (4). He joined the school with intention for studying hard but the whole day he was made to sweep the school ground. Once his father passed by the school then he saw that his son was sweeping the ground. He could not tolerate this thing and raised his voice which echoed throughout the school and it gave a great impact on his personality.

Every year a meeting will be held in the neighborhood at harvest time so that their wages might be raised but it is not so easy as they have to please the upper caste people at first to demand for their wages. All the resolutions made in the meeting were forgotten soon and proved to be of no use. The promises made only to evaporate in the air after the meeting. To compensate their job they will be given some grains or left over roti and sometimes scraps along with the roti. At the time of wedding season joothan was eaten with lot of relish thus it was joothan which became their life. "And yet no one had any grudges, or shame, or repentance" (10). When they demanded for more, for the work they have done they receive a reply as "you are taking basket full of joothan and on top of that you want food for your children" (11). These words penetrated Valmiki's breast as a sharp knife. For the first time Valmiki saw Mother Goddess Durga's nature in his mother when she emptied the basket in anger in front of Sukhdev Singh, a Tyagi. Some Chuhras consumed it with extreme anguish, as they didn't have any other options left for their survival.

Valmiki struggled a lot in getting school admission as the economic condition of family was very bad and they didn't have enough food for their survival. His family faced much more disaster when he lost his brother. During this period he was closely acquainted with books and very fond of them as a result he stood first in class. This result filled him with self confidence and determination. Once in school he was dare enough to question his teacher after hearing the story of Dronacharya and Ashwathama from Mahabharata. The teacher highlighted the poverty level of Ashwathama that instead of milk he was given flour by mixing water. Valmiki could not resist himself and asked his upper caste teacher that "Ashwathama was given flour mixed with 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 even write a word on our lives? The whole class stared at me as though I had raised a meaningless point. Master Saheb screamed at me, 'Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back" (23).

The repeated word Valmiki heard from any Tyagi was "Howsoever much you study...you will still remain a

Chuhra”(32). He was sure they no matter how hard his people might work his people will not be respected and furthermore these words made him to think that it is not going to be a piece of cake to study, but his father’s words kept him reminding that: “You have to improve the caste by studying” (59). These words of his father made him feel strong and interest in his studies. A drastic change happened in the history of his custom due to education. Valmiki was able to break down the traditional custom of his caste. During the wedding time, the Chuhras’ have to go door to door of Tyagi’s house to get some gifts by keeping salaam. This tradition for Valmiki was like begging and it was boiling inside him for a long. Valmiki’s father found Valmiki restless with towards this sort of custom. He decided to break down this custom in his elder son’s marriage. It was all achieved only because of his education which was earlier nowhere for his people.

Valmiki was basically from a Hindu background by birth but he had no interest in it as it was this religion which destroyed the lives of his people therefore He didn’t show much interest in worshipping any of the Hindu Gods or Goddesses. His father vigilantly asked him, “Munshiji... I hope you haven’t become a Christian.”¹¹ the questions raised in the hearts of Valmiki were similar to Ambedkar,

“Neither am I a Hindu’ If I were really a Hindu, would the Hindus hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill up with caste inferiority over the smallest things? ... I have seen and suffered the cruelty of Hindus since childhood. Why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak/ why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits?” (Valmiki 2003)

This was the question always burning inside him from his childhood. This religion has given him nothing yet at any cost, he did not think of conversion. He wanted to create his own identity as Dalit.

Valmiki felt proud of himself that he was the first to appear for board exam from his community. His father all the time reminded him of the benefits of education and its only education which could save him. He only remembered his father constantly telling him that he should improve his ‘caste’ through education. For the very first time, Tyagis’ visited Basti to congratulate Valmiki. The reason for this kind of transformation is education. This incident motivated his Basti people to adore education for their future generation and they understood the value of the education in the modern era. Valmiki was a studious person and kept trying to get rid out of his dark cave of wretchedness and slavery when he entered in his Inter-College.

It was this period which instilled a high level of consciousness and awareness regarding the revolution against caste and it encouraged him both physically and mentally to be powerful to resist the oppression of the caste system. Once reading all the books he came to know

“A new word, ‘Dalit’, entered my vocabulary, a word that is not a substitute for ‘Harijan’, but an expression of rage of millions of untouchables.... The deeper I was getting into

this literature, the more articulate my rage became. I began to debate with my college friends, and put my doubts before my teachers. It was this literature that had given me courage” (72).

He became the friend of Valmiki’s and Jatvas which the people of Indresh Nagar didn’t like. He feared that once again he would face problem and his education would be interrupted due his determination and work for dalits. He was determined to continue with his studies, despite the cost. Unfortunately he happened to discontinue his college education when he joined as an apprentice in the Ordnance Factory at Dehradun. When he joined he was totally unaware of the work, all he was aware of only one thing that he should do something different from what his community has been doing for centuries. Valmiki’s decision to join the job was appreciated by his father. Valmiki’s father repeatedly said, “At last you have escaped the caste” (77). This note made to pity on Valmiki’s father because he was not aware that the “caste follows one right up to one death” (78).

Valmiki in his later year went for training to Jabalpur; there he worked as an apprentice in Ordnance factory. The new surrounding and area gave him a new experience. Here he came into contact of a new ideology as he was introduced to Marxist literature by the students of the training institute. Valmiki joined these Marxists in forming a theatre group and staged many plays in the Institute’s auditorium. Later he began to write poetry, plays, short stories and started directing and acting. It was the beginning of his involvement in the theatre. Meanwhile, Valmiki decided to attend AIME examinations but he did not have enough money to pay the fees and once again his ambition for higher education had come to naught due to his poor background.

Drastic change was seen in Valmiki when he was at Jabalpur. He argued with his friends frequently on the contemporary issues. He took part in seminars and cultural functions. This was a turning point, where he showed deep interest and reflected his own ideology on literature. He was interested on social issues, rather than fictional style of writing. Meantime, the Dalit Panthers had started their activities. He sent an essay to “Naybharat Times”, Bombay on Dalit problems. Some of the students’ behavior was changed towards him. Since he showed empathy towards the Dalits, they had begun to research his caste. He was introduced to Marathi Dalit literature during this period. The writings of Dalit were changing the stereotype of Marathi literature. Their voice exhilarated him, filled him with new energy. His reading of Dalit literature had brought a huge change in his notion about what literature was. After some days he was transferred to Chandrapur Maharashtra. Valmiki got married on 27 December 1973 to Chanda, sister of his second bhabhi.

Valmiki’s plans were executed into practice during his stay at Chandrapur. He involved himself in social work for the Dalits. He was inspired by Dr.Ambedkar and Phule, who laid a foundation for Dalit revolution and many joined the struggle. This provided him a new dimension to his

writings. Ambedkar's battle of Dalit selfhood has contributed a lot to unleash the self-confidence of many Dalits. Dalit Panthers activists and leaders were trying to coalesce Ambedkarism and Marxism to bring out a big revolution. The whole of Maharashtra felt the glow of this new burst of Dalit power. This experience, however, had fizzled out badly.

Marathi Dalit literature was brought to limelight by the writers who came out from Dalit Panthers. Dalit literature became more progressive and more powerful than the Marathi literature. It was a modern in the true sense of the word. The conflicts in the country became more serious. The gulf of hatred between Dalits and non-Dalits had increased unabated but no one seemed to be trying to bridge it. Valmiki attended many programmes on Dalit issues and gave his views. He was not confined only to Maharashtra. He became more active participant in the movement. People started suspecting the more he involved actively in the revolt, as though he was trying to collapse the upper caste hegemony. Most of these suspicious people were none other than the Savarnas mainly responsible for the condition of the Dalits.

Valmiki happened to meet Dr. Sukhvir Singh, reader in Delhi University's Shivaji College; he was Hindi scholar, critic, and poet. He was also unhappy with the surname of 'Valmiki'. He wanted him to change his surname and replace it with 'Kharwal'. He was afraid of having his identity being revealed along with him. Many friends of Valmiki wanted him to change his surname so that he will not be teased by the upper-caste. He once lectured on "Buddhist Literature and Philosophy" at a conference. As soon as he came before the mike, a member of the audience shouted, "How can a 'Valmiki' be allowed to speak on Buddhist literature and Philosophy? Aren't you ashamed?" (131) and this was taken very light heartedly by Valmiki and looked at it as an educational experience.

A Dalit conference from five states was held in Chandigarh. Dr. Dharmvir had said in the conference, 'Don't remove it. It has become your badge of identity' and Dalip Singh, had made positive comments on his surname in the same conference, which gave him much encouragement and strength. His remarks raised certain issues that led to a lot of heated discussion on the surname of Valmiki in the later session of the conference. Some of the Sikhs in the conference were arguing animatedly. 'Whatever you say, a Chuhra will remain a Chuhra. However high an officer he may become, he cannot change his caste' (131). Ultimately the society had a set up, where the caste played a vital role in showcasing one's superiority, respect and merit in the society. It was not an easy way to win the battle in one day as it was a long battle and only those who had perseverance would win at last.

Most of Valmiki's relatives and friends discouraged him from using his inferior surname and requested him to hide it to escape humiliation and insult. They feared that his surname would make his identity known to others and resultantly bring disgrace to his life. He revealed his caste. Once he attended a meeting where he met Dr. Dharmvir and

discussed with him regarding his surname and pointed out the negativity of it and how this negativity grew in the society.

"He had said, 'Don't remove it'. It has become your badge of identity" (131). "'Omprakash' has no identity without it" (132). His surname became a part of his name, without his surname he was not identified later. Valmiki's autobiography ended with an account of an incident that took place when he and his wife Chanda returning to Chandrapur via Delhi, after a trip to Rajasthan. They got their seat in Pink City Express from Jaipur. Very soon they became familiar to a good looking family, husband, wife and two small children. During their conversation, Valmiki learned that the co-passenger was an officer in some ministry. The atmosphere was very favourable and filled the atmosphere with ease and gaiety. But it lasted no longer and suddenly the subject of conversation changed midstream. "The officer's wife enquired Valmiki's wife 'what caste they belong to?' Before Valmiki's wife replied, he replied as 'Bhangi' and that was the end; there was no communication between two families during the rest of the journey" (133). The atmosphere had turned oppressive. This was just one of the incidents. Valmiki says; Right from my childhood to this day, countless stings have stung not just my body but also my heart'.

One of the important elements in Indian society is 'caste' which is the base of each and every relation without which the Hindu religion can never survive. In India, it is the caste which matters the most as it becomes a decisive factor in deciding his or her fortune. Being born in a particular caste is not in the control of a person as it is a natural process. Valmiki tries to explain and questions, if one has the power to determine their caste by birth then why should I have been born in Bhangi household? Valmiki expresses the struggle and thus represents it in the form of an autobiography. The protagonist suffers basically in the hands of the upper caste, especially, Tyaga's. The caste in the Jothan is not fictitious but real one. The author gives voice to his own community. Moreover, the protagonist can be seen as the representation of the whole Dalit community. Valmiki is a great writer and scholar. He expresses his pangs in Jothan realistically. In the very beginning, Valmiki presents the atmosphere of the village and its structure, it can be seen that it is class-based society. The village is set in this definite structure according to caste so that people can easily be recognised regarding their castes. The caste of a person can be known by finding out which street or lane does he or she live in. Valmiki narrates how a Christian convert, Sewak Ram Masihi, came to the neighborhood to teach Chuhra children the alphabet. Valmiki's growing rift from Chuhra ceremonies makes his father agonize that he may have rehabilitated to Christianity. When Valmiki's father finds out that his son had begun to use Valmiki as his surname, a sign of relish of his self-pride and ecstasy is seen in him.

Valmiki's text is very rich in quality and can be understood in various ways as it is full of multiple meanings. He

dedicates the book to his father and mother and praises his parents for their heroic deeds, who worked hard for their child's betterment. They fought tremendously for the growth of Valmiki's education. Valmiki felt so proud on his father's attitude when he revealed his anger to Valmiki's principal for making him to sweep the school ground the whole day. It was for the first time he happened to see his father with full of courage and fortitude in front of the ruling community. This particular incident helped him to gain self confidence in many situations. Similarly he used an analogy under duress since he did not find another equivalent and appropriate place to describe his mother's heroic action. Her anger was compared to the anger of the goddess Durga when her mother throw the "Joothan" from the basket offered by Sukhdev Singh Tyagi, her act of boldness disseminates the seed of revolt in him.

Throughout Valmiki's writings, his father's ambition is evident. His voice is echoed for his own community who suffered indignities in the existing society. When a Tyagi questions his father as "He only got him to sweep; did not ask for his thumb in the gurudakshina like Dronacharya" (6).

A Brahmin teacher, Dronacharya asked Eklavya a lower caste student to cut his thumb as token of homage so that Arjun, the Kshatriya disciple could never be battled by Eklavya, he links the caste relations that has existed two thousand years ago by comparing with an incident that prevailed in a epic book 'Mahabharatha'. Joothan like other Dalit text represents the character of Eklavya stands as a symbol for the refutation of Dalits education.

Most of the Dalit text is written based on the actual situation that one has experienced in the society. Valmiki says, "I found these back stories to be very valuable pretexts that profoundly enrich the word on page. I make sure to share them with my students so that, they learn about the expanding ripples that a powerful literary text can create" (138). The past events are imprinted in his mind very strongly. Valmiki's school experience shows how Dalit children are ill-treated verbally, publicly and physically for no reason. Decades and decades of wall of silence and refutation have broken only through Dalit writing.

Valmiki ridicules and redrafts the colourful depiction of the villages that has been portrayed all these years in Indian literature written by mainstream writers. In his autobiography he portrays the real picture of village life of his caste people, Chuhras, who lived outside the village as they are denied basic requirements like access to public water and land due to their low caste stature. They were treated badly and deprived of their basic rights thus they were made to live a life of animals. They were forced to work under a scorching sun during harvest without payment. Valmiki highlights this suffering of his people in this work. They were given nothing except pain and beating.

Valmiki in the preface addresses, "Some people will find all this unbelieving and exaggerated.... Those who say, such

things don't happen here, I want to say to them, the sting of this pain is known only to the person who had to suffer it" (xxxvi). The text demands the answer to the question: "Why is it a crime to ask for the price of one labour? 'Why didn't an epic poet ever write a word on our lives? Why are Hindus so cruel so heartless towards Dalits?" (xxxvi). This writing reminds the writing of Ambedkar, whose speeches and writing has the heady, humorous and harsh question like

"I asked them [our Hindu friends], 'you take the milk from the cows and buffaloes and when they are dead you expect us to remove the dead bodies. Why? If you carry the dead bodies of your mother to cremate, why do you not carry the dead bodies of your 'mother-cows' yourself?" (Ambedkar 1969:143)

Similar to other Dalit writers Valmiki insists the position of reality for his writing, taking issue with those who find Dalit literature lacking in imagination.

Valmiki claims that all characters and actions in Joothan are factual, poses a considerable challenge to postmodernist critics who propose that "autobiography's truth is 'constructed', that the autobiographic narrator shapes as presentable self by reprocessing his/her memories in order to fit the present" (xxxvii).

Joothan is identified as a text of the marginalized people living at the bottom of the social periphery. Many regional words have been used in it. This work is Valmiki's voice for himself and his people also. He shows his past experience in this work.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Valmiki has never been shy regarding the expression of his caste status as he has always taken pride to share some of the most specific issues given no room for expression. He talks about those issues also which are silenced for a long time. He shares his views and says that though time has changed drastically yet there is a lot to be changed in the society regarding the condition of the dalits. There are a lot of suffering and suppression which have chained the downtrodden to the boat of slavery in the name of religion. It is said that a dalit person is weak and coward but it is no so in the case of Valmiki as he is very outspoken and brave in such matters. He has guts to raise voice not only for himself but for his community also so he has done a great job in raising voice against discrimination on the basis of caste in his works. This work can be considered the autobiography of his whole community as it represents all the members of the dalitsociety. It is the Literature which attracts Valmiki and his love towards writing literature dilled him with strength to raise his voice against prejudices and unfairness in the Hindu religion. He has inspired many more like him to be determined and strong enough to survive without fear thus he has given a new thought to the Dalits that they are equal and have no need to be afraid.

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