

Joothan: A Dissent on Hindu Religious Doctrine

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"I take religion to mean the propounding of an ideal scheme of divine governance the aim and object of which is to make the social order in which men to live a moral order."

Naik (120)

Writing has always been a double-edged sword; on the one hand, it is used to assert a certain order and dominate masses and on the other side it can also be used to break the age-old shackles that keep the marginalized in the dark. From its very inception, Dalit literature embodies the latter aspect of writing and strives to bring out the muted voices of a downtrodden community to the forefront.

A Dalit is a person who is considered to be untouchable; he is weak and feeble and is consequently exploited to the extreme. A Dalit is a victim of poverty, slavery, sycophancy, illiteracy, ignorance, and injustice. He may belong to any caste, religion or sect. He is forced to live in a deplorable condition. Dalit literature is concerned with the existential conditions of these people who are subjected to all forms of oppression that is social, political, economic, cultural and religious. Therefore, the literature written about them, as Sharatchandra Muktibodh says is "the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. And human freedom is the inspiration behind it" (271).

It is the burning spirit and active participation of B. R. Ambedkar in the welfare of his community that brought the transformation in the situation of the Dalits' lives. Ambedkar suggests to the first generation Dalit writers in one of his speeches: Don't let your pen be restricted to your own questions. Let its radiance dispel the darkness

in villages. Don't forget that in our country there is a huge world of the marginalized Dalits. Understand well their agony and pain. Strive through your literature to enrich their life. In it rests real humanity. (qtd. in Nimbalkar33)

This suggestion forms the basis of Dalit literature and it aspires to create a counter-culture and to propound an identity to Dalits in the society. It is a literature that intends to make the readers restless and angry. This revolutionary consciousness is based on the ideas of equality, liberty, justice and solidarity. It is a life-affirming literature which contemplates and delineates the real-life characters from Dalit community. The priority of this literature is to focus on the problems of Dalits rather than offer mere entertainment.

The downtrodden have hardly any place in the established canonical Indian literature, therefore Baburao Bagul, the Dalit activist and writer calls it as "Hindu literature" (56). Thus, the principle philosophy of Dalit literature is to bring total revolution in the society. With this in mind, Dalit writers use the traditionally denied weapon of literacy and expose the conditions under which they have lived. Their writings rebel against the Hindu institution which has brought to them their perpetual subordination through the Varna order. Their vehicle is often the brutal, coarse, and crude language of the slums which springs from a life of poverty, ignorance and violence. As Raj Kumar observes in his research work entitled, *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*:

The jaggedness of word, the granulated structure, the roughhewn expression, the scarcely muted anger – anger which may spit fire like wrath, burn lambently like satire, scorch like cynicism, kindle like anguish, and enflame like tragedy – these are some of the allotropic forms which are found in the Dalit writers in their various works and genres. (148)

The search for identity is a basic dynamism of Dalit literature which is more evidently expressed in the genre of autobiographies. The term 'autobiography' is defined by Raj Kumar as, "Autobiography: auto- self, bio-life, and graph- writing, is

an act of a conscious self which is documented through the active help of memory” (2).

Writing autobiography can be considered as a privileged act since it involves a glorification of the self. But this is a generalized assumption as not all autobiographers celebrate their selves. Unlike other non-Dalit autobiographers, Dalit autobiographers are common men and women. They don't enjoy any celebrity status and therefore their life story is not a list of accomplishments but an account of their brutal lives they are subjected to. By writing their autobiographies Dalit autobiographers have set an unprecedented trend and transgressed the established rules and regulations of non-Dalit autobiographies.

Dalit autobiographies differ from non-Dalit autobiographies in their demonstration of a new path for social and political transformation. Its language, structure, character, and symbols represent the agony and pain the Dalit community is undergoing for centuries. In Harish Wankhede's words, "The politics of Dalit autobiography lies in the conflicting relation between 'the given' identities and the identities carved by 'Dalit self'" (52).

The discovery of the self has always been of passionate curiosity to the readers of autobiographies, but Dalit autobiographical texts challenge these conventions in its narrative techniques, aesthetics and subjectivity. Dalit autobiographies like *Growing up Untouchable in India*, *The Outcaste*, *Akkarmashi*, *Government Brahmana*, *Ooru Keri*, *Chagya Rukh: Against the Night*, *Joothan* and *The Branded Uchalya* are quite well known in this regard. They voice against the canonical autobiographies by portraying Dalit life realistically. They mock the pseudo dignity of Indians who consider themselves as people constituting, and thus representatives of the greatest democracy in the world. This paper takes one of the above-mentioned autobiographies, namely Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, and analyses how the author uses his life story as a means to resist the injustices they have suffered which has its origin in the Varna system.

Omprakash Valmiki is one of the most famous Dalit writers from Uttar Pradesh who has come to lime light through the publication of his autobiography *Joothan* in 1997. He has also produced three collections of poetry – *Sadiyon Ka Santaap*¹ (1989), *Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka*² (1997), and *Ab Aur Nahin*³ (2000), two short story collections - *Salaam*⁴ (2000) and *Ghuspethiye*⁵ (2004), a critical work titled *Dalit Saahitya Ka Saundaryashastra (Aesthetics of Dalit Literature, 2001)*, and a history of the Valmiki community, *Safai Devata*⁶ (2009).

Written in Hindi, *Joothan* is translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. It is one among a body of Dalit writing that is unified by an ideology, an agenda, and a literary aesthetic. It provides an apt introduction to the underlying theme of Dalit autobiographies. As Valmiki explains in the introduction of his autobiography: “We need an ongoing struggle, and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, and a consciousness that leads the process of social change” (xxxiii).

The Hindi word ‘joothan’ literally means leftover food which is eaten by someone else. The title encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki’s community, which not only did rely on joothan for their survival but also had to relish it because of its deep religious overtones. Valmiki’s community is considered to be destined to eat the left over from upper caste families. The custom encapsulates the community’s position in the elaborate varna system. Valmiki’s inscription of these profound moments which viciously violate his and his people’s ‘human’ rights is extremely powerful and deeply disturbing.

The work documents the inhuman behaviour and atrocities committed against his community. It also paves the way to break the Brahminical shackles which comes in the form of traditions and customs of Hindu society. He discloses the hypocrisy of the Varna system which is the cornerstone of all the exploitation they have

¹ Age long pain and anger

² Enough! Have had too Much

³ Not Anymore

⁴ A gesture of greeting done by a slight bow of the head with fingers touching the forehead.

⁵ Intruders

⁶ The God of Scavenging

undergone. In the beginning of his autobiography, he talks about his village and the family background. The suffering of the Valmiki community in the Uttar Pradesh can be clearly understood by observing the people from Chuhara⁷ the community such as, his father Chotan, Ram Singh, and Sukkha Singh. On the other side are members from upper caste like Chandrabhan Tyaga, Sukhadev Singh Tyagi, Master Har Phool Singh, Sagwa Sing Tyagi, Chaudhari and Head Master Kaliram. They suppress these illiterates and gain prosperity through their endurance. This division in society is sanctioned by religion which makes it all the more indestructible.

The approval of hierarchy that resides in Hindu religion can be found in its sacred texts itself. John C. B. Webster in his book, *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives* cites that, "In the *Rigved* itself the hierarchy of caste was depicted as built into the order of creation; from the mouth of the primordial human being originated the Brahmins⁸, from his arms Kshetriyas⁹, from his thighs the Vaishyas¹⁰, and from his feet the Shudras¹¹" (11). The religious scripts cater the idea that one Varna is higher than other.

This graded inequality is being permitted by the Hindu religion for ages. According to Karl Marx, "religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of heartless world, the soul in a place without soul. It is the opium of the people" (qtd. in Naik, 128). This hierarchical system allots specific occupations to each caste forbidding them to move from one to another. Most of the privileges are enjoyed by the higher castes while the lower castes live to serve the needs of the upper caste people. In spite of their significant contribution to the absolute comfort enjoyed by the privileged Varna, they are considered to be impure to touch, to live together, to use public possessions or even to pray together. If religion is a path of life that strengthens the bond between man and God it should have equal laws for all human

⁷Chuhra or Bhanghi is a caste in India. They are assigned to remove human excrement and other wastes from the cities. Even today they work to clear the blockages in sewers and are considered as untouchables.

⁸The highest Hindu Varna among the four Varnas (social orders) of the Hindu society. They serve as priests and being learned men they usually take the place of teachers.

⁹Kshetriyas are the ruling class. Their duty was the protection and governance of the society.

¹⁰Vaishya takes the third position in the order of Varna system. Traditionally they were occupied in agriculture and cattle-rearing but over time they got to be landlords, merchants and money-lenders.

¹¹Shudra is the fourth Varna. Their occupation is the service of the other three Varna.

beings. But through the monopoly of a certain group of people, it has become the homage of the few who are up in the hierarchical parameter.

Valmiki's autobiography has created an important literary space for the expression of cultural and religious identities of his community. His life story is also the story of the Chuhra community in Uttar Pradesh to which he belongs. As per the aesthetics of Dalit literature, an author's individuality lies within his community. Valmiki talks about the religious traditions of his community in an interesting way even though humiliation and poverty underlie the reality of their existence.

He recollects that people from his community hardly celebrate festivals and cultural activities. As the communities are divided into castes and classes, gods and the goddesses are also divided according to their devotees. The Gods of Chuhra community are different from the Tyagas¹². They were placed outside the village, either on the bank of river, pond or on the top of hills and jungles. Their names and the nature of offerings are also different in shape according to the community. In Valmiki's words:

Although the Basti¹³ were Hindus in name, they did not worship any Hindu gods or Goddesses. At janmashtami¹⁴, it is not Lord Krishna but Jaharpir¹⁵, another god, whom they worshipped or they worship the spirits. And not on the eighth day, the ashtami, but on the morning of the ninth day of worship, the navami. In the same way during Deepawali¹⁶, it is not the goddess Lakshmi¹⁷ but Mai Madaran¹⁸ who is worshipped and offered a piglet. Or halva¹⁹ and pooris²⁰ are prepared at offerings.

(40)

¹²People with Brahminic origins who now live as agricultural cultivators.

¹³(In India) a slum inhabited by poor people

¹⁴Janmashtami or Gokulashtami, is an annual Hindu festival that celebrates the birth of Krishna who is the eighth incarnation of Hindu God Vishnu

¹⁵Jaharpir also known as Jahar Veer Gogga is a folk deity, worshiped in northern states of India.

¹⁶Festival of lights

¹⁷The Hindu Goddess of wealth and prosperity.

¹⁸A Goddess of the lower castes who resides as consciousness in all beings.

¹⁹A sweet made of sesame flour and sugar

²⁰A South Asian cuisine made from wheat flour.

In Dalit autobiographies, reason precedes religious beliefs and the author questions the age old religious beliefs which allot him a specific position in the societal structure. He is not allowed to aspire for more and various restrictions are imposed on him and his community so that they would concur with the demands of the religion. Education, the inevitable part of progress is denied to Dalits in accordance with the religious beliefs. Hindu scriptures don't allow the lower castes to learn the Vedas²¹ or take a proper education. Literacy is the privilege of the upper class and thus the works produced by them give an account of their glamorous lives, ignoring the voices of the Dalits who constitute the majority of the population.

One of the incidents from Valmiki's school days shakes the ideology of the strata, pointing out its fake heroes and the absence of his own caste in the epics. It was a lesson about Dronachary, the teacher of Pandavas²² and Kauravas²³. With teary eyes, Valmiki's teacher narrates an incident when poor Dronachary's famished son Ashwathama was led to drink flour dissolved in water tricking him to believe that what he had was milk. This incident was penned by Vyas in *Mahabharata*. Valmiki then asks a question: "So Ashwathama was given flour mixed in 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 ever write a word on our lives?" (23).

Similarly, mythological characters from Hindu religious scripts are repeatedly used to teach some morals or substantiate the point regarding the position of a certain caste. It is this reasoning that leads head master Kaliram to force Valmiki to sweep the school ground. His enraged father accuses Kaliram with malpractice, but the teacher calmly validates his point by citing a mythological instance. Dronachary has asked the thumb of his disciple, Eklavya, as part of *guru Dakshina*²⁴. Following this logic, the headmaster could not find anything wrong in asking Valmiki, a member of Chuhra community, to sweep the ground.

²¹Scriptures of Hindu religion written in Sanskrit

²² five acknowledged sons of Pandu, by his two wives Kunti and Madri. In *Mahabharata* story, they are considered to be the legitimate heirs of Hastinapura.

²³Refers to the one hundred children of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari in *Mahabharata*

²⁴ gift given to the teacher after the completion of formal education

Here the two perspectives of the same mythical character can be seen in point of view of Valmiki's father and Master Kaliram. For Master Kaliram, Dronachary is a good example as a *guru*²⁵ who asks his *shishya*²⁶ his thumb as a *gurudakshina*. But, for Valmiki's father Dronachary's act looks abominable as he cuts the thumb of his extraordinary and intelligent student Eklavya, only because he was not Kshetriya, that is to say in the present context he was a Dalit. Dronachary's act was supported by his desire to keep caste distinctions intact as according to his vision a lower caste man was not supposed to learn the secrets of archery.

This belief is staunchly held by the Hindus for centuries and is validated by their sacred scriptures. As John C. B. Webster explains in his book *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspective*,

The Bhagavad Gita upholds the hierarchical Varna order and the Upanishads say that one is born into the Chandala²⁷ caste and made to suffer all the resulting indignities as a punishment for sin committed in previous life; in other words, one's birth status as an untouchable is one's own fault and Dalits therefore deserve the inhuman treatment they receive. (12)

Webster, in the same book goes on to highlight another obligation detailed in the *Manusmriti*²⁸. He says, "Manu, who insisted that everyone marry within their own caste so that to keep the caste 'pure', ascribed the origins of the Dalit caste to an alliance between a Brahmin woman and a Shudra man, the most unaccepted alliance of all" (12).

The notion of this unaccepted alliance is continuously being followed even in the present society. Valmiki narrates another unfortunate incident that he had to face because of the religious orthodoxy. His relation with Savita, a Maharashtrian Brahmin suffered because of their caste difference. She loved him unaware of his caste. She dreams of their marriage, but suddenly the love changes into hatred when she comes to know that he is born in a Chuhra family. In his words,

²⁵ Teacher

²⁶ Disciple or student

²⁷ A Hindu lower caste assigned to the task of disposing the corpses.

²⁸ A Hindu legal text written in Sanskrit

I said as plainly as I could that I was born in Chuhra family of U.P. Savita appeared grave. Her eyes were filled with tears and she said tearfully, 'You are lying right?' 'No Savi . . . It is the truth . . . you had to know this', I had convinced her. 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 entered our hearts. What a lie culture and civilization are. (98)

Thus, religion plays a vital role in the Indian society even today and it wields a great influence on the life and conditions of the downtrodden people. It becomes the monopoly of the few who are part of the higher strata of the society. Though the religion is being defined and illustrated by the many thinkers and social activists, it is still continuously practised in the way it was written in the so called sacred books.

By writing the story of his life through *Joothan*, Valmiki finds a means to expose the hypocrisy of religion which asks his community to remain in their poorly states in order to serve the needs of the upper castes. It critically presents the real conditions and truly expresses the feelings of Dalits who are urged to assert their dignity in the society. He raises questions against the traditions and customs as well as discloses the hidden inhumanity eating the leftovers of the others. By placing these inhuman practices as a part of culture and tradition they have been naturalized and continued even in the modern age. Dalit autobiographies resist these injustices and they reflect the growing identity, awareness and consciousness of the Dalits. It drives the fellow countrymen to contemplate on individual experiences and puts forward the possibility of prospective changes.

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